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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 60, No. 3, Whole No. 346, SEPT., 1972. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at 75¢ a copy. Annual subscription $9.00 in U.S.A., and possessions and Canada; $10.00 in the Pan American Union; $10.00 in all other countries. Editorial and General Offices, 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N. Y. 10003. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions and other mail items are to be sent to 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N. Y. 10003. Office of Publication — 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. 01040. Second-Class postage paid at Holyoke, Mass. 01040.

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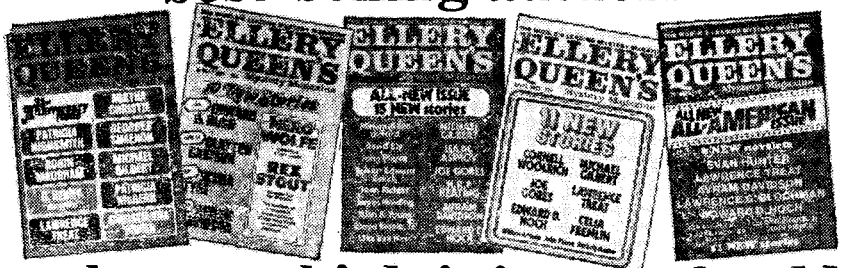

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a *NEW* sports detective story by

GARY BRANDNER

Well, it's the beginning of the bump-thump-and-lump season again—August, when the professional football teams start their training for the bruising, bone-crushing collisions of the long cold winter... Football detective stories are comparatively rare, and therefore all the more welcome. Gary Brandner's "Whole New Ball Game" is a 'tec touchdown...

WHOLE NEW BALL GAME

by GARY BRANDNER

One of the favorite complaints of transplanted easterners is that there are no seasons in Southern California. However, on this warm August day the clack and thump of colliding bodies in football gear were unmistakable sounds of autumn to Lieutenant Peter Blaney. As he approached the fenced field, the uniformed man lounging at the gate smiled a welcome.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant. How's business?"

"I never pay any attention on my day off," Blaney said.

"How come you got stuck with Tuesday as your day off? Seems like a real nothing day."

"Somebody down at City Hall ran a survey showing that Beach City has fewer killings on Tuesday than any other day of the week. What would be a better day off for the head of Homicide?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, go on in. Coach has the boys in a full-dress workout today."

Blaney walked through the gate and along the side of the field where the Beach City Sharks practiced for the opening of the NFL season. He recognized the probable starting offense and defense scrimmaging while the reserves worked out at the far end. The big quarterback moved the team with an air of confidence and precision that was new to the Sharks.

Blaney moved on to the long

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bench on the sidelines and sat next to a wizened man wearing an old baseball cap. The man winced every time the two lines met head on.

"How's it going, Andy?" Blaney asked.

"They haven't carried anybody off yet, but if Kincaid don't take it easy the whole team will be in the whirlpool bath Sunday instead of playing Detroit."

"He *is* working them pretty hard for an exhibition game."

"We call them 'pre-season' games now. Orders from the Commissioner. But no matter what they're called, Kincaid is playing each one like it's the Super Bowl this year. He's got his first real shot at the conference title since the league expanded into Beach City."

"What do you think, Andy? Have the Sharks really got a chance?"

"I'm only the trainer, and I don't make predictions for the record, but between you and me I think we've got a heck of a shot at it. If everybody stays healthy, that is. Especially big Number 18 out there."

Blaney watched the quarterback fire a bullet pass by the charging linemen and into the hands of his tight end. "Ah, yes," he said. "Hollywood Hughie Rocco. Is he as good as I've been reading?"

"In the nightclubs or on the field?"

"As a football player."

"He's at least as good as you've read. Strong as a bull, and he can throw the ball seventy yards into a bucket. All that kept him from starting last year was that he had to learn to read the defenses. By the end of the season he was picking them apart like Johnny Unitas in his prime. Now he looks like a world-beater. I'll never know how he does it on four hours' sleep a night. Or less."

"What about the curfew?" Blaney said. "I thought Kincaid was very big on rules."

"The rules don't apply to Mr. Rocco. Coach had a rule against hair on the face too, but take a look at the mustache and sideburns on Rocco. When you've got a man who can give you your first winning team in six years you kind of bend the rules a little."

Blaney nodded sympathetically and switched his gaze to the far end of the field. There a tall young man worked out with a center and a reserve quarterback. He wore no helmet, and his blond hair gleamed in the sun. At the snap of the ball the tall player would shoot away from the imaginary line of scrimmage, execute a couple of ballet-perfect feints against a phantom quarterback,

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and miraculously turn with his hands outstretched at the instant the thrown ball arrived. He never dropped one.

"Who's that catching passes over there, Andy?" Blaney asked. "He's good."

"I *guess* he's good. That's Carl Gilday. We just got him in a trade with the Milwaukee Barons. He wasn't due to report until tomorrow, but he flew in early. Coach didn't even have a playbook ready for him, but he wanted to come out today anyway and loosen up."

The two men watched while Gilday took off in a straight fly pattern. The white 81 on the blue jersey seemed to blur as he streaked down the sideline. The young quarterback let the ball go in a tremendous arc that seemed sure to fall ten yards ahead of the sprinting receiver. At the last instant Gilday shot his arms straight over his head and clamped onto the ball with fingers like steel hooks.

Blaney gave a low whistle of appreciation. "He was all-pro two years ago, wasn't he? What kept him out so much last season—injuries?"

"That's the story that went out."

"You mean there's more to it?"

"Yeah, but just a lot of ugly gossip. I know you wouldn't be interested in that."

"Of course not," said Blaney. "Let's hear it."

"It was that wife of his. That Shirlee with two e's he met at the party in L.A. for the Pro Bowl players two years ago. Gilday was no drinker, but he got himself gassed at that party and when he woke up he was in Vegas, married to Shirlee."

"I knew they were married, and I heard they were getting a divorce, but what's so unusual about that?"

"She just turned out to be an all-pro tramp, that's what. When Gilday went to training camp that summer Shirlee went with him and hung around the Barons' locker room all season. She was sort of a team mascot, if you know what I mean."

"Then that explains what went wrong with Gilday's playing last year."

"Right. It's a cinch he wasn't going to play any more for the Barons, and he asked to be traded to a Southern California club—us, the Rams, or the Chargers."

"Why?"

"Because this is where his future ex-wife is living, right here in Beach City. Not that he's so anxious to be close to her, but there's going to be a custody battle for their kid, a boy, and Gilday wanted to be close to the scene."

"Do you think he'll be able

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to keep his mind on football with all that going on?"

"From the looks of it he's sure going to try. If it was me I don't think I could do it. Do you know where Shirlee is now?"

"Where?"

"Living with a photographer named Norman Wexler. She hung around with Wexler before she married Gilday—did some posing for nudie magazines. Now she's moved back in with the guy and got the kid with her."

"That's rough. Let's hope Gilday comes out of it all right. Rocco throwing and him catching could be a great combination."

"They sure could." Andy glanced at his watch. "It's almost break time. Mind giving me a hand with a little lifting?"

"Glad to," Blaney said.

He followed Andy into the brick building that fronted on the practice field. They went in past the rows of lockers to a scarred wooden counter. There Andy raised a hinged flap to let them into a room strewn with uniforms and equipment. On the floor were two washtubs filled with crushed ice and wide-mouthed plastic bottles of a green beverage. The metal screw caps were lettered: Kwencho. Blaney hoisted one end of the tub while Andy took the other, and they carried it back out to the bench.

"Is this stuff any good?" Blaney asked as they started back for the second tub.

"Kwencho? I guess it must be," Andy said. "Every team in the league uses it. It tastes awful, but it has some kind of a solution of mild acids and minerals that fills the guys up when they're thirsty without making them bloated like water does."

The two men carried the second tub out and dropped it beside the other at the end of the bench. As they did so their attention was caught by sounds of a commotion at the gate. There a dozen teenage girls came squealing past the protesting guard like a flock of multicolored birds.

"Aw, not again," moaned Andy.

"This happens often?" Blaney said, watching the girls scamper toward the playing field.

"Only since Rocco has become the West Coast Joe Namath. They swoop down on us nearly every day."

Out on the field the scrimmage stopped while the football players watched the approach of the young girls. Hughie Rocco held out his powerful hands in playful protest while flashing a brilliant

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smile beneath his mustache.

"I'd better go help round 'em up," Andy said. He started out onto the field where the assistant coaches and several of the players chased the nimble teenagers while Head Coach Emil Kincaid waved his arms in annoyance. Rocco stood in the center of the melee enjoying himself hugely.

As Blaney stood on the sidelines watching the action, one of the girls darted past him. She tried to change directions to avoid a grinning linebacker, then stumbled right into the surprised athlete's embrace. At once she became a kicking, squirming bundle of fury.

Looking around for help, the linebacker fastened his eyes on Blaney. "Lieutenant?" he pleaded.

With a sigh Blaney walked over to where the unhappy player held his captive. The girl wore a droopy Thrift Shop hat over long blonde hair, and concealed her young body beneath a serape and baggy jeans. Her eyes were shadows behind saucer-sized purple glasses. Incoherent sounds came from between her clenched teeth.

"Here now, take it easy, young lady," Blaney said.

"Make this animal let go of me!" she shrieked. "And you keep your dirty hands off!"

At this the linebacker loosened his grasp and fled back onto the field. Her arms freed, the girl swung her tiny fist at Blaney's jaw. By reflex the policeman's left arm came up as a guard and he heard the girl's knuckle pop as she connected with the bone of his forearm. She spun away whimpering in pain.

"What's this," said an amused voice behind him, "police brutality?"

Blaney turned to see Hughie Rocco, who had his helmet off now so that his glossy black hair could flow freely over his ears.

"One of your fans broke a tackle and tried to punch me," Blaney said.

"Here, let me have a look at that hand, sweetheart," said the quarterback.

The girl, sucking on her jammed knuckle, appeared to dissolve with embarrassment at being spoken to by her hero. She looked around for her companions, and when she saw they were being rounded up and ushered out the gate, she went dashing after them.

"Happens every time," Rocco laughed. "Get one of those babies alone and they fly to pieces."

A blast from Kincaid's whistle stopped Rocco from continuing. The big quarterback

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turned lazily to see what the coach wanted.

"Ten-minute break," Kincaid bellowed. "And you've already had three minutes of it." The coach jabbed his hands into his pockets and glared around him with his habitual expression of barely controlled anger.

The football players relaxed and headed for the iced tubs of Kwencho. As his teammates approached, Hughie Rocco trotted away and struck up a conversation through the fence with his ejected fans.

A player wearing number 14 jogged to Blaney's side and tugged off the blue helmet with its decal of shark's teeth. "Hi, Pete," he said. "How does the team look to our leading fan?"

"Pretty good, Don, now that—"

The unfinished sentence hung awkwardly in the air for a moment, then Don Layton rubbed his gray-peppered hair. "You were about to say, now that we've got a *real* quarterback." Layton chuckled. "Don't worry about hurting my feelings. Nobody knows better than I do that if it hadn't been for expansion I would have been out of professional football six years ago. I'm a fair journeyman quarterback, but now they've got Rocco, and he can be a superstar. I just hope there's a place for me on the squad this year as a receiver."

"You mean a flanker or split end?"

"They don't call them that any more, just wide receivers. Anyway, that's what I'm trying to play. They've got the kid from Purdue backing up Rocco, so there's no room for me there. But one more season will make a big difference in my pension money, and I'm going to try to stick it out any way I can."

"I wish you luck, Don, you deserve it." Blaney tapped a thumbnail against the white numerals on Layton's jersey. "It'll be a shame, though, to change that number to something in the 80's if you switch to end. I can remember watching number 14 tear up the Coliseum when you were at UCLA."

"I think they'll let me keep 14, even though it is a quarterback's number, since it's become sort of identified with me. It's still a legal number for a receiver, even though ends are assigned 80's, when they come into the league."

Blaney's eyes were drawn again to the far end of the field where Carl Gilday ran back and forth in zigzag bursts of speed while the others rested.

Don Layton followed the lieutenant's gaze and laughed

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ironically. "Just my luck that when I'm trying to make it at a new position we get a guy who's an all-pro."

Another blast from the whistle ended the conversation. "Everybody back to work," Kincaid shouted. "Hustle!"

With some good-natured grumbling the players trotted back out onto the field. All except Hughie Rocco. He took time for a few more words with the giggling girls, then sauntered back to the bench where he selected a bottle of Kwencho. The other players turned away, while Coach Kincaid seemed about to burst.

With exaggerated nonchalance Rocco unscrewed the cap. He took two short swallows from the bottle, recapped it, then dropped the bottle back into the tub. "Okay, let's go," he called, and started to jog out toward the others.

Rocco had gone only ten yards when he seized his throat with both hands and crashed to the ground. His body snapped and jerked in convulsions while the watchers stood frozen.

Blaney was the first to get moving. He sprinted onto the field and knelt beside the fallen quarterback, where he was quickly joined by the trainer.

"I don't feel any pulse," Andy said, pressing his fingers against Rocco's throat, "and he's not breathing. There's an oxygen tank in the equipment room. I'll get it."

Blaney leaned over the blue-white face and sniffed. "Never mind," he said as Andy started to leave the field. "Oxygen can't help Rocco now. Where's Kincaid?"

"Here I am, Lieutenant." The head coach pushed through the ring of stunned players. "What happened to him?"

"He's dead," Blaney said. "He's been poisoned."

Kincaid opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Here's what I want you to do," Blaney snapped. "Tell your players to shower and dress, but stick around. Have the gate guard keep everybody away from those tubs with the bottles. And don't anybody move the body." To Andy he rapped, "Where's the nearest phone?"

"Back in the coach's office."

"Take me to it."

As the trainer led the way back across the field, Blaney stopped to kneel beside the tubs of Kwencho. He took out a pen and poked carefully at several of the bottles.

"Each of these has a numbered label stuck on it," he said. "What's that for?"

"Those are jersey numbers so every man gets his own

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bottle," Andy said. "It's a psychological thing, you might say. Gives the guys a feeling of identity. Don't ask me who started it or why, but no matter what team you go to you'll find everything numbered—even places on the bench—and you better not take somebody else's."

"Who had a chance to get at those bottles?" Blaney asked as they walked on.

"I put 'em on ice right away when they were delivered this morning, so they were there in the equipment room cooling when the team came in to suit up. I guess any of the players could have got at them if they wanted to. The coaches, too, for that matter."

"When did you put the numbered labels on?"

"Right away, before I put the bottles on ice."

They reached the partitioned cubicle in one corner of the equipment room that served as Kincaid's office, and Blaney put in a call to Police Headquarters.

The people he asked for arrived within minutes, and while the lab team went over the evidence and the coroner's men checked the body, Blaney took the two Homicide detectives aside.

"There was an odor of bitter almonds around the victim's mouth," he said, "so it was probably cyanide. Most likely it came out of the plastic bottle he drank from just before he collapsed.

"I've made a note of the people I want to talk to personally. You divide up the others. First, find the coach and ask him to see me in his office."

Blaney was sitting in the coach's chair when Kincaid slouched dejectedly into the room.

"How long do you intend to keep us here?" the coach complained. "If I can't hold a scrimmage, I could at least be home looking at some films of Detroit. Not that there's much I can do without my Number One quarterback."

"It was darned inconsiderate of Rocco to do this to you," Blaney said tightly.

"I don't mean to sound hard, but my whole offense was built around that guy. Lord knows what I'll do now. The Purdue kid isn't ready yet—I suppose I'll have to go with Layton at quarterback again. Damn the luck."

Blaney's voice turned ice-cold. "Listen, Kincaid, a man just died out there. I don't think I want to hear any more about your damn busted game plan."

"What do you want me to say—that I'm sorry he's dead? You bet your life I'm sorry. It's

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probably going to cost me my job. If you want me to say I liked the guy, forget it. I couldn't stand the arrogant s.o.b. But he was my meal ticket and I would have thrown my body in front of a bullet to protect him."

"Tell me this, Coach, would Don Layton have made the team as a pass catcher?"

"No way," Kincaid said. "He doesn't have the height, the hands, or the speed for the job."

"All right, that's all for now. But stick around."

Don Layton was the next to enter the small office. He took a seat in front of the desk and regarded Blaney with mild gray eyes. "Is this an official interview, Lieutenant?"

"Let's call it semiofficial."

"Are you going to ask me if I slipped cyanide to the star so I could have my old job back?"

"Did you?"

"No. I'm sorry Rocco's dead—I hope you believe that—but I can't pretend I'm broken up about the way it turned out for me."

"Kincaid has already talked to you?"

"Yes. He told me to be ready to start at quarterback Sunday. That man has a football for a heart."

"How did you feel about Rocco personally, Don?"

"I respected his skills as a football player, but I didn't like anything else about him. And not just because he took my job away from me—that's part of the game. But he didn't care a rap about the team or anyone else except Hollywood Hughie Rocco. He had all the tools to make a winner out of the Sharks, but his attitude was disruptive. I'm just being honest, Pete."

"I appreciate that. One more thing, Don—"

"Yes?"

"How did you know the poison that killed Rocco was cyanide?"

Layton returned the policeman's level gaze. "I guess one of the ambulance attendants must have mentioned it."

"I suppose so," Blaney said. "I'll be seeing you, Don."

Carl Gilday's hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes were as blond as bleached straw. His dark blue eyes were shadowed and sad as he took the chair across from Blaney.

"I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances, Carl," the lieutenant said. "I've admired your play at end with the Barons."

Gilday attempted a smile. "Thanks. You must be talking about the season before last."

"Yes. I've heard about your

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problems last year. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, but all that is over with now. Or it will be next month when I go to court and get custody of my son."

"You're not afraid the judge might decide against you?"

"There isn't a chance. My wife is a borderline psychopath, and she won't be able to hide the fact in court. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but it was her decision to make a fight of it."

"I wish you luck," Blaney said. "What I want to ask you now is about your feelings toward Hughie Rocco."

"I didn't have any. I never met the man before today, and he didn't say half a dozen words to me. I know what his personal reputation was, but that made no difference to me. My job is to run the patterns and catch the football. The quarterback's job is to throw it. We don't have to be buddies."

"Okay, that does it for now, Carl. Thanks."

With the names on his own list checked off, Blaney joined the two detectives questioning the other players and coaches. When that was done he sent everybody home, cautioning them not to leave town.

The next morning Blaney sat at his desk in Headquarters frowning down at the pages of notes in front of him.

"It seems nobody liked Hughie Rocco," the lieutenant remarked to his brass monkey paperweight. "But nobody had a big enough hate to kill him. After all, he was the team's bread and butter. Playoff money for his teammates, and maybe the very jobs of the coaches. They all needed Rocco. Well, not quite all."

The lieutenant's soliloquy was interrupted by a plain-clothesman who entered with a manila folder containing several sheets of paper.

"Here's the report from the coroner," he said. "Also the lab results."

"Give me the meat of it, will you, Tim?" Blaney said.

The detective leafed through the folder, then he read, " 'Cause of death—paralysis of respiratory centers. This due to ingestion of hydrocyanic acid formed when dilute acids in beverage mixed with salts of potassium cyanide. Traces of such salts found on mouth of bottle from which victim drank.' "

"All the other bottles were clean?"

"Right."

"Any usable prints?"

"No. The plastic surface of the bottle is too grainy to pick them up. The lab lifted some from the paper label, but they

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belong to the team trainer, and his were on all the labels."

"Thanks, Tim. Leave the folder here and I'll go through it later."

When the plainclothesman had left, Blaney walked down the hall to the police library. He checked out a book on chemistry and took it back to his desk where he studied it for an hour, making notes as he read. Finally he clapped the book shut, scowled at the brass monkey, and clumped out of the office.

Fifteen minutes later Blaney stood in front of the wooden counter in the Sharks' equipment room watching Andy clean a pair of low-cut football shoes.

"Rocco's?" the lieutenant asked.

"That's right. He won't be needing them any more, and they're almost like new."

"Where is everybody? No practice today?"

Andy made a sound through his teeth. "Believe it or not, the team voted to take the day off. Kincaid was ready to climb the wall. He said next thing you know they'll all be writing books about how dehumanizing football is."

"Poor Kincaid."

"You can't blame the man too much. Football is the only thing he knows—it's his whole life. And in this league you win or you get booted out."

"I guess you're right, Andy," Blaney said. His voice trailed off as he watched the trainer spread Rocco's jersey on the counter and begin folding it.

"Not much point in saving this. Nobody on our club will want to wear a dead man's number." Andy looked up just in time to see Blaney disappearing through the door. "Something wrong?" he called, but the lieutenant was already out of earshot.

Blaney drove from the Sharks' practice field to a street on the fringes of the main business district. He pulled to a stop in front of a dingy shop with *Norman's Photography* lettered in gilt on the window. Behind the glass was a display of studio portraits and some old-timey-looking pictures with a card reading: *Instant Nostalgia—Modern Tintypes by Norman.*

Blaney pushed the door open and walked in. Somewhere in the back a child was crying. A youngish man with a wispy beard watched from behind the counter.

"Can I help you?"

"Is Shirlee here?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Lieutenant Blaney of the Beach City Police. Here's my identification. Now if

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Shirlee's here you get her out front fast."

The young man muttered something under his breath and turned to a curtained doorway leading to the rear of the shop. He pushed the curtain aside and a sharp-faced girl walked through.

She said, "Did you want to see me about something, Mr. Fuzz?" Her orange-red hair was cut in a pixie bob and she wore a tight jump suit that clung to her well-rounded body. She held her hands clasped behind her in a mocking little-girl attitude.

"Hello, Mrs. Gilday," Blaney said. "How's your hand?"

"My hand?"

"The one you cracked on my forearm yesterday."

"Yesterday? I don't follow you."

"Let's not kid around," Blaney snapped. "You were out at the Sharks' practice field yesterday in a blonde wig and a hippie getup."

Shirlee brought the hand around in front of her and held it up. It was swollen and discolored. "It hurts like the devil," she said.

"I suppose you heard what happened out there."

"You mean the big-shot quarterback dropping dead? I heard it on the radio. What of it?"

"The poison that killed him was potassium cyanide."

"So?"

"I did some reading today on potassium cyanide. I learned that one of the uses for it is in photography, particularly in the tintype process. I'll bet there's a supply right here in this shop."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying you got into a disguise and took a bottle of potassium cyanide down to the Sharks' practice yesterday. You waited until everybody was distracted by the girls on the field, then you poured the poison into the bottle of Kwencho that killed Hughie Rocco."

"You're out of your mind! I was here all day yesterday. Tell him, Norman."

"Not me," said the bearded photographer in a shrill voice. "I'm not getting mixed up in this." To Blaney he said, "She took the cyanide out of here, all right. The bottle was gone yesterday and back this morning, only now it's almost empty."

"You rotten fink," Shirlee snarled at him.

"Call me whatever you want to, baby," he said. "Playing house with you was one thing, but murder makes it a whole new ball game."

Shirlee made a spitting motion at the photographer and

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turned back to Blaney. "You don't scare me, pig," she said. "Just try to prove that I had a reason to waste that quarterback, whatsisname. I didn't even know him."

"I know you didn't, Shirlee," Blaney said. "It's true you had no reason to poison Rocco. The man you wanted to kill was your husband, Carl Gilday, who was about to get custody of your child."

Shirlee's lips peeled away from her small teeth in an ugly grimace as Blaney went on.

"You've been around training camps enough to know how they identify the Kwencho bottles with the players' jersey numbers. In your hurry to find your husband's you read one of the labels upside down and poisoned the wrong bottle. Flip the end's number, 81, and you get the quarterback's—18."

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In this, the 15th recorded case in the career of Nick Velvet, the unique thief accepts what seems to be a "simple enough" assignment—an easy job and a quick $20,000. But the assignment proves to be something else—one of the most unusual, if not the most unusual, Nick has ever tackled. And once again Nick has to succeed first as a detective before he can succeed as a thief.

(Don't miss the first Hoch-Velvet-Rand parody-pastiche —the next story in this issue.)

THE THEFT FROM THE EMPTY ROOM

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet sat stiffly on the straight-backed hospital chair, facing the man in the bed opposite him. He had to admit that Roger Surman looked sick, with sunken cheeks and eyes, and a sallow complexion that gave him the appearance of a beached and blotchy whale. He was a huge man who had trouble getting around even in the best of condition. Now, laid low with a serious liver complaint, Nick wondered if he'd ever be able to leave the bed.

"They're going to cut through this blubber in the morning," he told Nick. "I've got a bet with the doctor that they don't have a scalpel long enough to even reach my liver." He chuckled to himself and then seemed about to drift into sleep.

"You wanted to see me," Nick said hastily, trying to focus the sick man's attention.

"That's right. Wanted to see you. Always told you if I needed a job done I'd call on you." He tried to lift his head. "Is the nurse around?"

"No. We're alone."

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"Good. Now, you charge twenty thousand—that right?"

Nick nodded. "But only for unusual thefts. No money, jewels, art treasures—nothing like that."

"Believe me, this is nothing like that. I'd guess it's one of the most unusual jobs you've ever had."

"What do you want stolen?" Nick asked as the man's head bobbed again.

"First let me tell you where it is. You know my brother Vincent?"

"The importer? I've heard of him."

"It's at his country home. The place is closed now for the winter, so you won't have any trouble with guards or guests. There are a few window alarms, but nothing fancy."

"You want me to steal something from your brother?"

"Exactly. You'll find it in a storeroom around the back of the house. It adjoins the kitchen, but has its own outside door. Steal what you find in the storeroom and I'll pay you twenty thousand."

"Seems simple enough," Nick said. "Just what will I find there?"

The sick eyes seemed to twinkle for an instant. "Something only you could steal for me, Velvet. I was out there myself a few days ago, but the burglar alarms were too much for me. With all this fat to cart around, and feeling as bad as I did, I couldn't get in. I knew I had to hire a professional, so I thought of you at once. What I want you to steal is—"

The nurse bustled in and interrupted him. "Now, now, Mr. Surman, we mustn't tire ourselves! The operation is at seven in the morning." She turned to Nick. "You must go now."

"Velvet," Roger Surman called. "Wait. Here's a picture of the rear of the house. It's this doorway, at the end of the driveway. Look it over and then I'll tell you—"

Nick slipped the photo into his pocket. The nurse was firmly urging him out and there was no chance for further conversation without being overheard. Nick sighed and left the room. The assignment sounded easy enough, although he didn't yet know what he'd been hired to steal.

In the morning Nick drove out to the country home of Vincent Surman. It was a gloomy November day—more a day for a funeral than an operation—and he wondered how Surman was progressing in surgery. Nick had known him off and on for ten years, mainly through the yacht club where

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Nick and Gloria often sailed in the summer months. Surman was wealthy, fat, and lonely. His wife had long ago divorced him and gone off to the West Indies with a slim handsome Jamaican, leaving Surman with little in life except his trucking business and his passion for food and drink.

Surman's brother, Vincent, was the glamorous member of the family, maintaining a twelve-room city house in addition to the country home. His wife Simone was the answer to every bachelor's dream, and his importing business provided enough income to keep her constantly one of New York's best-dressed women. In every way Vincent was the celebrity success, while Roger was the plodding fat boy grown old and lonely. Still, Roger's trucking business could not be dismissed lightly—not when his blue-and-white trucks could be seen on nearly every expressway.

Nick parked just off the highway and walked up the long curving driveway to Vincent Surman's country home. The place seemed closed and deserted, as Roger had said, but when Nick neared it he could see the wired windows and doors. The alarm system appeared to be functioning, though it wouldn't stop him for long.

Following Roger's directions and referring to the marked photograph, he walked along the driveway to where it ended at the rear of the house. There, next to the kitchen door, was the storeroom door that Surman had indicated. Both the door and the single window were locked, but at the moment Nick was mainly anxious to see what the room contained—what he'd been hired to steal for $20,000.

He looked in the window and saw a room about 20 feet long and 14 feet wide, with an inside door leading to the kitchen.

The room, with its painted red walls and white ceiling and wooden floor, was empty. Completely empty.

There was nothing in it for Nick Velvet to steal.

Nick drove to a pay telephone a mile down the road and phoned the hospital. They could tell him only that Roger Surman was in the recovery room following his operation and certainly could not talk to anyone or receive visitors for the rest of the day.

Nick sighed and hung up. He stood for a moment biting his lower lip, then walked back to the car. For the present there was no talking to Surman for a clue to the puzzle. Nick would

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have to work it out himself.

He drove back to the country home and parked. As he saw it, there were only two possibilities: either the object to be stolen had been removed since Roger saw it a few days earlier, or it was still there. If it had been removed, Nick must locate it. If it was still in the room, there was only one place it could be—on the same wall as the single window and therefore out of his line of vision from the outside.

Working carefully, Nick managed to bypass the alarm system and open the storeroom door. He stood just inside, letting his eyes glide across every inch of the room's walls and floor and ceiling. The wall with the window was as blank as the others. There were not even any nail holes to indicate that a picture might have once hung there.

And as Nick's eyes traveled across the room he realized something else: nothing, and no one, had been in this room for at least several weeks—a layer of dust covered the floor from wall to wall, and the dust was undisturbed. Not a mark, not a footprint. Nothing.

And yet Surman had told Nick he was there only a few days ago, trying to enter the room and steal something he knew to be in it—something he obviously was able to see through the window.

But what was it?

"Please raise your hands," a voice said suddenly from behind him. "I have a gun."

Nick turned slowly in the doorway, raising his hands above his head. He faced a short dark-haired girl in riding costume and boots, who held a double-barreled shotgun pointed at his stomach. He cursed himself for not having heard her approach. "Put that thing away," he said harshly, indignation in his voice. "I'm no thief."

But the shotgun stayed where it was. "You could have fooled me," she drawled, her voice reflecting a mixture of southern and eastern origins. "Suppose you identify yourself."

"I'm a real-estate salesman. Nicholas Realty—here's my card."

"Careful with the hands!"

"But I told you—I'm not a thief."

She sighed and lowered the shotgun. "All right, but no tricks."

He handed her one of the business cards he carried for just such emergencies. "Are you the owner of this property, Miss?"

She tucked the card into the waistband of her riding pants.

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"It's Mrs., and my husband is the owner. I'm Simone Surman."

He allowed himself to relax a bit as she stowed the shotgun in the crook of her arm, pointed away from him. "Of course! I should have recognized you from the pictures in the paper. You're always on the best-dressed list."

"We're talking about you, Mr. Nicholas, not me. I find you here by an open door that should be locked, and you tell me you're a realtor. Do they always carry lock picks these days?"

He chuckled, turning on his best salesman's charms. "Hardly, Mrs. Surman. A client expressed interest in your place, so I drove out to look it over. I found the door open, just like this, but you can see I only took a step inside."

"That's still trespassing."

"Then I apologize. If I'd known you were in the neighborhood I certainly would have contacted you first. My understanding was that the house had been closed down for the winter."

"That's correct. I was riding by, on my way to the stables, and saw your car on the highway. I decided to investigate."

"You always carry a shotgun?"

"It was in the car—part of my husband's hunting equipment."

"You handle it well."

"I can use it." She gestured toward the house. "As long as you're here, would you like to see the inside?"

"Very much. I gather this room is for storage?"

She glanced in at the empty room. "Yes. It hasn't been used in some time. I wonder why the door was open and unlocked." She looked at the alarm wires, but didn't seem to realize they'd been tampered with. "Come around to the front."

The house was indeed something to see, fully furnished and in a Colonial style that included a huge brick oven in the kitchen. Nick took it all in, making appropriate real-estate comments, and they finally ended up back at the door to the storeroom.

"What used to be in here?" Nick asked. "Odd that it's empty when the rest of the house is so completely furnished."

"Oh, wood for the kitchen stove, supplies, things like that. I told you it hadn't been used in some time."

Nick nodded and made a note on his pad. "Am I to understand that the house would be for sale, if the price was right?"

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"I'm sure Vincent wouldn't consider anything under a hundred thousand. There's a great deal of land that goes with the house."

They talked some more, and Simone Surman walked Nick back to his car. He promised to call her husband with an offer in a few days. As he drove away he could see her watching him. He had no doubt that she believed his story, but he also knew she'd have the alarm repaired by the following day.

The news at the hospital was not good. Roger Surman had suffered post-operative complications, and it might be days before he was allowed visitors. Nick left the place in a state of mild depression, with visions of his fee blowing away like an autumn leaf.

He had never before been confronted with just such a problem. Hired to steal something unnamed from a room that proved to be completely empty, he had no way of getting back to his client for further information. If he waited till Roger was out of danger and able to talk again, he would probably jeopardize the entire job, because Vincent Surman and his wife would grow increasingly suspicious when no real estate offer was forthcoming during the next few days.

Perhaps, Nick decided, he should visit Roger Surman's home. He might find some clue there as to what the fat man wanted him to steal. He drove out along the river for several miles, until he reached a small but obviously expensive ranch home where Roger had lived alone for the past several years.

Starting with the garage, he easily opened the lock with his tool kit. The car inside was a late-model limousine with only a few thousand miles on it. Nick looked it over and then went to work on the trunk compartment. There was always the possibility, however remote, that Roger had succeeded in his own theft attempt, but for some reason had not told Nick the truth. But the trunk yielded only a spare tire, a jack, a half-empty sack of fertilizer, and a can of red paint. The spotless interior of the car held a week-old copy of *The New York Times*, a little hand vacuum cleaner for the upholstery, and an electronic device whose button, when pressed, opened or closed the automatic garage door. Unless Nick was willing to believe that the fertilizer had been the object of the theft, there was nothing in the car to help him.

He tried the house next, entering through the inside garage door, and found a neat

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kitchen with a study beyond. It was obvious that Roger Surman employed a housekeeper to clean the place—no bachelor on his own would have kept it so spotless. He went quickly through the papers in the desk but found nothing of value. A financial report on Surman Travelers showed that it had been a bad year for the trucking company. There were a number of insured losses, and Nick wondered if Roger might be getting back some of his lost income through false claims.

He dug further, seeking some mention of Roger's brother, some hint of what the empty room might have contained. There were a few letters, a dinner invitation from Simone Surman, and finally a recent bill from a private detective agency in New York City. After another hour of searching, Nick concluded that the private detective was his only lead.

He drove down to Manhattan early the next morning, parking in one of the ramps off Sixth Avenue. The Altamont Agency was not Nick's idea of a typical private eye's office, with its sleek girl secretaries, chrome-trimmed desks, and wide tinted windows overlooking Rockefeller Center. But Felix Altamont fitted the setting. He was a slick, smooth-talking little man who met Nick in a cork-lined conference room because a client was waiting in his office.

"You must realize I'm a busy man, Mr. Velvet. I can only give you a few moments. Is it about a case?"

"It is. I believe you did some work for Roger Surman."

Altamont nodded his balding head.

"What sort of work was it?"

The detective leaned back in his chair. "You know I can't discuss a client's case, Mr. Velvet."

Nick glanced around at the expensive trappings. "Could you at least tell me what sort of cases you take? Divorce work doesn't pay for this kind of layout."

"Quite correct. As a matter of fact, we do not accept divorce cases. The Altamont Agency deals exclusively in industrial crimes—embezzlement, hijacking, industrial espionage, that sort of thing."

Nick nodded. "Then the investigation you conducted for Roger Surman was in one of those fields."

Felix Altamont looked pained. "I'm not free to answer that, Mr. Velvet."

Nick cleared his throat, ready for his final bluff. "It so happens that I'm in Roger Surman's employ myself. He hired me to try and clamp a lid

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on his large insurance losses. The company's threatening to cancel his policy."

"Then you know about the hijackings. Why come to me with your questions?"

"Certainly I know about the hijacking of Surman trucks, but with my employer in the hospital I thought you could fill me in on the details."

"Surman's hospitalized?"

"He's recovering from a liver operation. Now let's stop sparring and get down to business. What was hijacked from his trucks?"

Altamont resisted a few moments longer, then sighed and answered the question. "Various things. A shipment of machine tools one month, a load of textiles the next. The most recent hijacking was a consignment of tobacco leaves three weeks ago."

"In the south?"

"No, up here. Shade-grown tobacco from Connecticut. No crop in the nation brings as high a price per acre. Very valuable stuff for hijackers."

Nick nodded. "Why did you drop the investigation?"

"Who said I dropped it?"

"If you'd been successful, Surman wouldn't need me."

The private detective was silent for a moment, then said, "I told you we don't touch divorce cases."

Nick frowned, then brightened immediately. "His sister-in-law, Simone."

"Exactly. Roger Surman seems intent on pinning the hijackings on his brother, apparently for the sole purpose of causing a divorce. He's a lonely man, Mr. Velvet. He'll give you nothing but trouble."

"I'll take my chances," Nick said. "Thanks for the information."

When Nick arrived at the hospital late that afternoon he was intercepted by a brawny thick-haired man who bore more than a passing resemblance to Roger Surman.

"You're Velvet, aren't you?" the man challenged.

"Correct. And you must be Vincent Surman."

"I am. You're working for my brother."

"News travels fast."

"You were at my country house yesterday, snooping around. My wife caught you at it. This morning you were in New York, talking to that detective my brother hired."

"So Altamont's on your side now."

"Everyone's on my side if I pay them enough. I retain the Altamont Agency to do periodic security checks for my importing company. Naturally he phoned me after you left his

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office. His description of you matched the one Simone had already given me."

"I hope it was flattering."

"I'm not joking, Velvet. My brother is a sick man, mentally as well as physically. Anything you undertake in his behalf could well land you in jail."

"That's true," Nick agreed with a smile.

"Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it."

"My work for him is just about finished. As soon as he's well enough to have visitors I'll be collecting my fee."

"And just what was your work?"

"It's a confidential matter."

Vincent Surman tightened his lips, studying Nick. "Very well," he said, and walked on to the door.

Nick watched him head for the hospital parking lot. Then he went up to the information desk and asked for the doctor in charge of Roger Surman's case. The doctor, a bustling young man whose white coat trailed behind him, appeared ten minutes later, and his news was encouraging.

"Mr. Surman had a good night. He's past the worst of it now. I think you'll be able to see him for a few minutes tomorrow."

Nick left the hospital and went back to his car. It was working out just fine now—the money was as good as in the bank. He drove out the country road to Vincent Surman's place, and this time he took the car into the driveway, around back, and out of sight from the road.

Working quickly and quietly, Nick bypassed the alarm and opened the storeroom door once more. This time he knew what he was after. On his way to the hospital he'd stopped to pick up the can of red paint from the trunk of Roger's car. He had it with him now, as he stepped across the threshold into the empty room. He stood for a moment staring at the red walls, and then got to work.

It had occurred to him during the drive back from New York that there might be a connection between the can of red paint in Roger Surman's trunk and the red walls of the empty room. Roger had driven the car to the country house a few days before his operation to attempt the robbery himself. If the paint on the walls had been Roger's target—the paint itself—he could have replaced stolen paint with fresh red paint from the can.

Nick had stolen strange things in his time, and taking the paint from the walls of a room struck him as only a little unusual. The paint could cover any number of valuable things.

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He'd read once of a room that had been papered with hundred-dollar bills from a bank holdup, then carefully covered over with wallpaper. Perhaps something like that had been done here, and then a final layer of red paint applied.

He got to work carefully scraping the paint, anxious to see what was underneath; but almost at once he was disappointed. There was no wallpaper under the paint—nothing but plaster showed through.

He paused to consider, then turned to the paint can he'd brought along. Prying off the lid, he saw his mistake at once. The red in the can was much brighter than the red on the walls—it was an entirely different shade. He inspected the can more closely and saw that it was marine paint—obviously destined for Roger Surman's boat. Its presence in Roger's trunk had been merely an annoying coincidence.

Before Nick had time to curse his bad luck he heard a car on the driveway. He left the room, closing the door behind him, and had almost reached his own car when two men appeared around the corner of the house. The nearer of the two held a snub-nosed revolver pointed at Nick's chest.

"Hold it right there, mister! You're coming with us."

Nick sighed and raised his hands. He could tell by their hard icy eyes that they couldn't be talked out of it as easily as Simone Surman had been. "All right," he said. "Where to?"

"Into our car. Vincent Surman has a few more questions for you."

Prodded by the gun, Nick offered no resistance. He climbed into the back seat with one of the men beside him, but the car continued to sit there. Presently the second man returned from the house. "He's on his way over. Says to keep him here."

They waited another twenty minutes in silence, until at last Surman's car turned into the driveway. Simone was with him, bundled in a fur coat against the chill of the autumn afternoon.

"The gun wasn't necessary," Nick said, climbing out of the car to greet them.

"I thought it might be," Vincent Surman replied. "I had you tailed from the hospital. You're a thief, Velvet. I've done some checking on you. Roger hired you to steal something from me, didn't he?"

"Look around for yourself. Is anything missing?"

"Come along—we'll look."

With the two gunmen staying close, Nick had little choice. He followed Vincent

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and Simone around to the storeroom door. "This is where I found him the first time," she told her husband, and sneezing suddenly, she pulled the fur coat more tightly around her.

"He was back here when we found him too," the gunman confirmed.

Vincent unlocked the storeroom door.

The walls stared back at them blankly. Vincent Surman inspected the place where the paint had been scraped, but found nothing else. He stepped outside and walked around, his eyes scanning the back of the house. "What are you after, Velvet?"

"What is there to take? The room's empty."

"Perhaps he's after something in the kitchen," Simone suggested.

Vincent ignored her suggestion, reluctant to leave the rear of the house. Finally, after another pause, he said to Nick, "All right. We'll look through the rest of the house."

An hour later, after they'd convinced themselves that nothing was missing, and after the gunmen had thoroughly searched Nick and his car, Vincent was convinced that nothing had been taken. "What's the paint for?" he asked Nick.

"My boat."

The dark-haired importer sighed and turned away. "Roger is a madman. You must realize that. He'd like nothing better than to break up my marriage to Simone by accusing me of some crime. Altamont was hired to prove I was hijacking Roger's trucks and selling the goods through my import business. He hoped Simone would quarrel with me about it and then leave me."

Nick motioned toward the gunmen. "These two goons could pass for hijackers any day." One man started for him, but Vincent barked an order. Simone's eyes widened, as if she were seeing her husband's employees for the first time.

"You don't need to hold them back," Nick said.

This time the nearer man sprang at him and Nick's fist connected with his jaw. The second man had his gun out again, but before he could bring it up Simone grabbed his arm.

"Simone!" Vincent shouted. "Stay out of this!"

She turned on her husband, her eyes flashing. "I never knew you used hoods, Vincent! Maybe Roger knows what he's talking about! Maybe you really are trying to ruin him by hijacking his trucks."

"Shut up!"

Nick backed away, his eyes still on the two hoods. "I'll be leaving now," he said. "You

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two can fight it out."

Nobody tried to stop him. As he swung his car around the others in the driveway he could see Vincent Surman still arguing with his wife.

The next morning Roger Surman was sitting up in bed, just finishing a meager breakfast, when Nick entered the hospital room. He glanced at the paper bag Nick was carrying and then at his face. "I'm certainly glad to see you, Velvet. Sorry I didn't have a chance to tell you what I wanted stolen."

"You didn't have to tell me," Nick said with a grin. "After a couple of false starts I figured it out."

"You mean you got it?"

"Yes, I've got it. I had a few run-ins with your brother and his wife along the way, but I got the job done last night."

"How did you know? How *could* you know?"

"I talked to your detective, Altamont, and learned about the hijackings. Once I started thinking about it—the country place, the driveway leading to the storeroom—my reasoning must have followed yours quite closely. Vincent's hired hijackers were bringing the loot there and leaving it in the storeroom for transfer to his own importing company trucks."

The fat man moved uncomfortably under his blanket. "Exactly. I tried to tell Simone, but she demanded proof."

"I think she's got it now. And I think you have too. It wasn't easy finding something to steal in an empty room—something that would be worth $20,000 to you. First, I considered the room itself, but you would have needed heavy equipment for that—and you told me you'd hoped to accomplish the theft yourself. That led me to your car, and I found the paint can in your trunk. Next, I almost stole the paint off the walls for you, until I ruled that out too. Finally, I remembered about the last shipment that was hijacked a few weeks ago. It consisted of bundles of valuable tobacco leaves, and certainly such a shipment would leave traces of its presence. Yesterday, out at the house, Simone walked into the storeroom and sneezed. Then I remembered something else I'd seen in your car."

Roger Surman nodded. "The little hand vacuum cleaner. I was going to use it if I got past the alarms."

Nick Velvet nodded and opened the paper bag he was still carrying. "I used it last night—to steal the dust from the floor of that empty room."

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meet VIC NELVET *and* BLAND

One indication that an author and his characters have "come of age," have "arrived," is when another author writes the first parody or pastiche. Here is that "sincerest form of flattery," a respectful imitation of Edward D. Hoch's Nick Velvet (changed to Vic Nelvet) and the Double-C man, Rand (now Bland), with Captain Leopold (Captain Leo Pold) thrown in for full measure. Have a happy . . .

THE THEFT OF THE SPY WHO

by JOSH PACHTER

At long last Vic Nelvet felt a tug on his line.

It had been a busy summer. Early in June an African diplomat had hired him, for his usual fee of $20,000, to steal the Liberty Bell from Philadelphia's Independence Hall. Vic had almost turned that job down, insisting he never stole anything of monetary or historical value, until the diplomat assured him, through an interpreter, that all he wanted was the crack in the bell's side, not the bell itself.

Less than a week after that job was completed to his client's satisfaction, a retired banker had Vic swipe the 18 flags from a private Long Island golf course, a caper that had ended in death for the banker and no fee for Nelvet.

Soon after, in July, a New York City cab driver handed Vic one of the toughest assignments of his career—steal the forty-eighth floor of the Empire State Building, elevator shafts and all. It had taken him more than three weeks to finish that job, and twice he'd been ready to give it up as impossible.

Now, though, it was August, and Vic Nelvet was enjoying a much-needed vacation from work. The little Maine fishing village was almost deserted—it was too hot for most tourists—so Vic had had no trouble finding a cottage on the water for himself and his girl friend,

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Glorious. The motorboat and fishing tackle he had stolen weeks before from the Outdoor Show at the New York Coliseum.

So far there had been only one problem with the otherwise idyllic vacation: the fish were just not cooperating. Vic and Glorious had spent three days on the water, and each night they had come back to shore with nothing but a hamper full of empty beer cans.

But on the fourth day a headache had kept Glorious in bed and, now, at long last, Vic felt a tug on his line.

He spun the handle of his trim Winwood reel expertly, watching the coils of thin nylon line grow bigger and bigger. With a final spin and heave he pulled back on his rod and a sparkling lake trout broke the surface of the water and flopped into the boat.

The fish weighed at least 13 pounds, Vic judged. A real beauty. And it was about time he and Glorious could stop eating those frozen TV dinners and sink their teeth into some tender broiled trout.

Vic grasped the slippery creature behind the gills and deftly worked the silver hook out of its mouth. There was a spot of blood where the hook had torn into the fish's flesh. Vic pressed the squirming fish firmly against the boat's gunwale and picked up a heavy cleaver with his free hand. Might as well get it over with, he thought.

He raised the cleaver over his head.

"Wait a minute, Nelvet," the fish said, its husky voice surprisingly familiar. "I have to talk to you."

Vic looked down at it. That voice, those pale-gray eyes . . .

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" Vic asked, lowering the cleaver.

"I think not," the fish demurred. "I have a job for you, Nelvet. An important job."

"Sorry," Vic said, "I'm on vacation."

He lifted the cleaver back over his head.

"This is considerably more important than your vacation Nelvet. You see, I'm no ordinary American trout. I am an Imperial lake trout, a representative of the Russian government. I was sent here to see you about a most urgent matter. Now, if you would just toss me back into the water I'll tell you why I've contacted you."

Vic looked at the fish narrowly, then sighed and held it out over the side of the boat. It slithered out of his hands and plummeted into the cool dar

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water. Before the ripples could dissipate, its head broke back through the surface.

"Ah, that's better," the fish said. "Now, then, let's see. Up to about ten years ago my government had a spy in this country, a very efficient agent named Vladimir Koskoff."

"Another trout?"

"No, a human. Koskoff was one of our top agents here in America. His career was brilliant, and it lasted a good many years. Then, in 1962, he decided it was time to retire from our service. We planned, of course, to bring him back to Russia, but Koskoff had spent almost two decades in your country, and he said he preferred to remain in his adopted homeland. We were confident he would never betray us in any way, so we acceded to his wishes. Over the years following Koskoff's retirement our confidence in him proved well-placed.

"Anyway, we provided Koskoff with quite a large sum of money when he left our—employ. A pension fund, I suppose you would call it, in gratitude for his many years of faithful service. He deposited this money in a bank and proceeded to live a quiet lonely life on the interest."

"How do you know all this?" Vic asked.

"We received letters from him periodically, just brief notes letting us know how he was getting along. About a year ago he wrote that he had met and married an American girl twenty years his junior. We were surprised, naturally, but the news was on the whole pleasing. Even more pleasing was the letter which reached Moscow about four months later, informing us that his new wife was expecting a child. So Koskoff's wife seemed to have relieved the loneliness of his retirement, but his life here was still a quiet one. Until this past Thursday."

"What happened then?"

"Koskoff must have picked up some valuable information somewhere, information so important that he felt compelled to emerge from his retirement long enough to transmit it to our government. Last Thursday afternoon he was riding a train from his home in Larchmont, a small town in Westchester County, to New York City. From what we were able to determine from various sources, during this train ride Koskoff wrote down his information, in code, in the margin of the front page of Thursday's *New York Times*. We've assumed that Koskoff wrote this message in Delta Three, the code we were using when he

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was an active agent. We've switched codes several times since then, but Delta Three has never been broken by your Intelligence agencies.

"Obviously, Koskoff was planning on making contact with one of our agents in New York and turning the encoded information over to him for transmission back to Moscow. Unfortunately, your government managed to find out about Koskoff somehow. One of your agents entered Koskoff's car and, before anyone could stop him, shot Koskoff through the heart, seized the newspaper, jumped off the train, and made his escape."

Vic shifted to a more comfortable position on the gunwale. "And where do I fit in?" he said.

"My government feels that if Koskoff's information was important enough to drag him out of retirement, it is essential we get to see it. We want you to recover the Koskoff code for us."

"Where is it now?"

"That's the problem. We know your government has that newspaper, but we haven't been able to find out where they are keeping it or who they've got working on it. Your job will be to locate the paper and then get it for us. We are prepared to double your usual fee."

"You mean you want me to steal a newspaper from the United States government?"

"That is correct."

"And what if I refuse? This Koskoff's code must involve some pretty important government secrets. I wouldn't even consider turning that kind of stuff over to the Russians. I mean, I may be a thief, but I'm no traitor."

"I've been authorized to go as high as fifty thousand dollars, Nelvet. That's a lot of money. Why don't you think it over—"

"I don't have to think it over," Vic interrupted. "Money's not the point. I'm just not interested in selling out my country. For *any* price."

"That is your final answer?"

"Definitely."

The fish sighed. "You force me to play my trump card, Nelvet," it said. "I had hoped we could come to an agreement without this, but you leave me no choice."

"What are you talking about?" Vic demanded.

"You came to Maine with a certain young woman, did you not?"

"Glorious? Yes, what about her?"

"Where is she now?"

"She didn't feel well this morning. She stayed back at the cottage."

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"Is she alone?"

"Sure!"

"No, Nelvet, she is not. There are two of my men there with her, holding her hostage. And if you refuse to steal that newspaper for us she dies."

Bland, of the Department of Congealed Communications, was leafing through a thick volume labeled *TOP SECRET* when his secretary appeared in his office doorway and murmured, "The Chief wants to see you."

The Double-C man looked up and scowled. "I'm right in the middle of this Egyptian thing," he complained. "See if it can wait, will you?"

"The Chief said right away. It sounded important."

Bland nodded, slipped his book into the top drawer of his desk, locked the drawer, and got to his feet.

"All right," he said. "Might as well find out what's up."

Hasty, the Chief, was sipping whiskey from a tall glass when Bland walked in. He waved a hand at the bar in the corner and said, "Fix yourself a drink, Bland."

"Thank you, sir," Bland replied carefully.

Something *was* up. Hasty was usually the most business-like of men, with no interest at all in the social amenities. Bland had often seen him with a drink in his hand, but had never before been invited to join him. He dropped ice into a tumbler and poured himself a generous helping of bourbon, then carried the glass over to the chair Hasty kept for visitors, sat, and took a pull at his drink.

"Here," Hasty said, "what do you make of this, Bland?"

It was a newspaper, *The New York Times*, dated the preceding Thursday and folded so that only the top-right quarter of the front page was visible. Written in blue ink down the right-hand margin of the paper were the words *Jason*, *Allen*, *Peter*, *Frank*, and *Louis*.

"These names?" Bland asked.

"Right. Written by a Communist agent, a man named Koskoff. Heard of him?"

"I think so," Bland replied slowly. "Old-timer, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he's been in retirement for quite some time now, but he seems to have gotten onto something big and jumped back into the game. The C.I.A. picked this up and sent it on to me this morning. I've been working on it for several hours now, but I don't seem to be getting anywhere, so I thought the best thing might be to set a fresh mind to it."

" 'Jason, Allen, Peter, Frank, Louis,' " Bland read. "Five

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five-letter names. There's lots of possibilities."

"Yes, and I think I've already explored most of them. Just the same, I'd like you to take a crack at it."

"Why didn't the C.I.A. just pull this Koskoff in and put a little pressure on him?"

"Their man acted somewhat impulsively," Hasty said. "Koskoff is dead."

Bland ran his index finger gently around the rim of his glass. "Oh," he said, "I see. You say he was retired?"

Hasty nodded. "Left a pregnant young wife, too, from what I understand. Shame. But the man *was* a spy. Anyway, take the paper back with you, Bland, and see what you can do with it."

"I'm still working on that Egyptian cipher, you know."

"This takes priority. The Pentagon is worried that the Russians might already have a copy of this thing and be way ahead of us on it. We've got to crack Koskoff's code and we've got to crack it fast."

Bland lifted his glass to his lips and drained it.

"I'll do what I can," he promised.

The first thing to do, Vic Nelvet decided, was to determine which of the myriad government departments, agencies, or bureaus had possession of the Koskoff newspaper. And the best way to track down that information would be to consult his old reliable sources. In Vic's business—the business of thievery—an extensive network of stoolies and informants was essential, and Vic Nelvet's underground information network was among the finest.

So, with two burly Soviet agents standing guard over a bound and gagged Glorious in a corner of the cottage, Vic drew three sheets of typing paper toward him and began composing letters to Action Line, Ann Landers, and Dear Abby.

Bland's telephone buzzed. He threw down his pen, stretched out a hand to the receiver, and lifted it.

"Well?" Hasty's voice demanded.

The Double-C man closed his eyes and sighed. "It's rough going, Chief," he said.

"Are you getting *anywhere?*"

"Well—no, I'm afraid not. The first thing that hit me was that Koskoff probably wouldn't have been informed of any of the codes the Russians have come up with since his retirement, so he must have used Delta Three or one of the other old systems for his message. But I did some

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checking on that and drew a blank: none of the older codes involved any list of names.

"So then I thought: look, this Koskoff has been out of action for ten years. By now he probably felt perfectly safe, and he wasn't at all worried about his message getting intercepted. So maybe he just stuck his information into a simple cipher and figured he'd send it off to Moscow and let the experts worry about decoding it. And if the Russians were supposed to be able to work the thing out, I didn't think *I* ought to have too much trouble doing it, either.

"So I ran those damn names through the wringer: transposition, mono- and polyalphabetic substitution, syllabary squares . . . everything I could think of, all the routine stuff, and a lot that's not routine. But that was a washout too; nothing clicked."

"Exactly," Hasty muttered. "I did the same things myself and came up with the same answers. Have you got any other ideas?"

"Well, right now I guess I've gone back to my first hunch: Koskoff *did* use an old code, but it must be one we never intercepted. And I get the feeling that those names are just simple word substitutions: each one randomly represents a key phrase or sentence. If I'm right, Koskoff's message could mean just about anything, and there's no way we could ever break the code without a copy of the codebook."

"Well," Hasty frowned, "you'd better keep working on it. I just got another call from the Pentagon. They're afraid Koskoff might have stumbled across some top-secret figures about our ABM installations, and they have to find out for sure. If the Russians have gotten hold of that information we may have to restructure our entire national-defense setup."

"I'm doing my best," Bland said.

He set the telephone receiver back onto its cradle and picked up his pen.

Vic Nelvet pushed open the heavy plate-glass doors of the fifth-largest government building in Washington and walked in. He scanned the left-hand column of the building directory, crossed the tiled lobby to a bank of elevators, and rode up to the ninth floor.

The car eased to a smooth stop, the door slid silently open, and Vic stepped out of the elevator. A line of doors stretched away from him, down a long, brightly lit corridor. He stopped before the third door on the left. A small plaque,

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hung at eye level, read: *Bland, Department of Congealed Communications.* He could make out the faint sound of typing from inside the office.

Vic grinned, straightened his tie, and lightly patted the almost invisible bulge in the side pocket of his pinstriped suit coat. As he swung the office door open, the typing noises stopped and a secretary swiveled her chair away from a typewriter stand to look up at him. She was young, with a fresh-scrubbed college co-ed look, and long strawberry-blonde hair that danced about her shoulders when she moved her head.

"Yes?" she said politely.

"Edwards," Vic told her. "H. O. Edwards of the *Washington Post.* I've got an appointment to see Mr. Bland."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Edwards," the girl smiled. "One moment, please."

She picked up a telephone, pushed a button, and after a short pause repeated the name Vic had given her. There was another pause, then she returned the phone.

"Mr. Bland can see you right away, Mr. Edwards," she said. "Just go through that door."

The inner office was small, but tastefully furnished. The paneled walls were covered with artwork, mostly abstract originals, interestingly contrasted with several prints by Degas and Renoir. The furniture was plush and new, the floor carpeted in thick rich burgundy.

As Vic walked in, Bland, seated behind a huge modernistic desk, was folding a copy of *The New York Times* so that only half of its back page was visible.

Vic held back a smile.

Bland dropped *The Times* carelessly onto his desktop and waving a hand at the clutter of books and scraps of paper piled all over the desk, said, "Excuse the mess. It's been a hectic couple of days and I haven't had much chance to pretty the place up. Well, now, Mr. Edwards, just what can I do for you?"

"Well," Vic began, "as I told you over the phone, we're running an article on cryptography in next Sunday's magazine section of the *Post* and you seemed to be the perfect person to come to for information."

Bland leaned back in his chair and tented his fingers. "I'll be happy to help you if I can," he said, "but there's obviously quite a bit of material that I'm not at liberty to talk about."

"Oh, of course," Vic said quickly. "I'm not fishing for a scoop or anything. This is just a feature story."

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Suddenly Bland snapped his fingers and exclaimed, "Say, I bet I've got just the kind of story you're looking for! It was about three years ago—I can get you the exact date if you want it—anyway, about that time we got an anonymous tip that . . ."

And the two men fell into a relaxed, friendly discussion about codes and ciphers, Vic taking down occasional notes in his pocket memo book. Bland had just finished an anecdote about the naval code used by the Germans during the second World War when Vic, glancing over his shoulder through the open office window, whistled appreciatively and said, "Take a look at that sunset!"

Bland's head turned. The sun had dropped almost out of sight, and the stretch of sky that was visible between the buildings of downtown Washington was streaked with crimson.

"Beautiful," Bland agreed.

As they watched, the lines of red thinned, deepened, and melted into the darkening sky. Below, street lights winked on across the city.

"Well," Vic sighed, "that's my cue to get back to the salt mine." He closed his notebook, slipped it into the inside breast pocket of his suit coat, and stood up. Bland rose and they shook hands.

"Thanks for the interview," Vic told him.

"My pleasure," said Bland. "Hope I've been of some help."

"Oh, you have," Vic smiled. "You certainly have."

Vic Nelvet dropped his line into the water. Less than thirty seconds passed before the thin nylon strand stretched taut and the top of his pole bent in a delicate arc toward the surface of the lake.

He began reeling in his catch.

It was harder this time than it had been before—much harder—and when the trout finally broke out of the water and flopped into his boat, Vic saw why. The fish had grown, grown incredibly. It had shot up from the 13 inches he remembered to a full six feet in length.

"You've gotten bigger," Vic remarked.

"Yes," the fish agreed. "I think it's your American food. Well, Mr. Nelvet, have you got it?"

"I've got it. Where's Glorious?"

"She'll be released as soon as you turn the newspaper over to me. Where did you find it?"

"A man named Bland had it."

"You stole it?"

"Right."

"Could you speak up,

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Nelvet?" the fish asked. "I didn't hear you."

"I said I stole the newspaper from Bland of the Department of Congealed Communications."

"Have you got that, Flesher?" the fish cried, and an enormous bass poked its snout over the side of Vic's boat and said, "Every word, Captain!"

"Hey, what's going on?" Vic demanded.

As if in answer, a human hand popped out of the Russian trout's mouth and pulled on a hidden zipper. The metal catch ran easily down the fish's belly. And the plastic fish suit fell away, revealing the husky figure of a man.

"Pold!" Vic exclaimed. "I *knew* I knew you from somewhere!"

"Captain Leo Pold, New York Police Department, at your service," the man said gruffly, "and I've finally got you, Nelvet. I've been trying to pin you down for years and this time I've got you dead to rights. Your confession to stealing that newspaper will be enough to put you away for a long time. Take him, men!"

And a school of sharks, their badges glittering in the midafternoon Maine sunshine, slowly approached the boat.

The heavy metal door creaked open, then clanged shut. There was a click, and light flooded the cell. Vic's hands shot up to protect his eyes.

"You've got a visitor, Nelvet," Captain Pold's husky voice told him.

Cautiously Vic uncovered his eyes. The light stung after the long hours of darkness, and Vic blinked feebly until Pold and the other figure swam into focus.

It was Bland.

"Hello, Edwards," the Double-C man said.

"Hi. You get your newspaper back okay?"

Bland nodded.

"I've got to admit, you guys really set it up nicely," Vic said. "The whole phony deal. Getting those stories about Koskoff into the papers and over the radio. All that trouble, just so I wouldn't be looking for a frame-up. Well, I walked into it all right. How long did it take the two of you to cook this thing up?"

Pold and Bland looked at each other.

"We—ah—didn't actually cook anything up at all," Leo Pold said slowly. "The Koskoff story was all true—I heard about it, and it sounded as if it might be a good way to nab you, Vic. The whole bit with the newspaper was right up

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your alley. Anyway, Bland didn't know anything about it. I was afraid he wouldn't agree to play along."

"And that's why I came up to New York," Bland said. "There really *is* a Koskoff code, Nelvet, and I've got a hunch you could crack it for us if you wanted to. I don't know why, but something tells me you've got a line on what the thing means. Captain Pold has agreed to drop the charges against you if you'll help us."

"Agreed nothing," Pold said bitterly. "I was *ordered* to drop the charge if you cooperate, Vic."

"I thought we went through all this, Pold," murmured Bland. "You're talking about a simple case of theft. I'm talking about our national security."

"Yes, I understand. But I'd still like to keep him behind bars."

"I'm sure you'll manage to get another chance. Well, Nelvet, how about it? Are you interested?"

"Sure I'm interested. I can't see any sense in sitting around here and letting Leo throw the book at me. And you're right, I *can* tell you what Koskoff's code means."

Bland ran his tongue lightly across his lower lip.

"You can?"

"Look, Bland, if what the papers said about Koskoff was true, then the answer is simple. Here's a man who's been out of the espionage game for ten years. He has lived a solitary life after his retirement, but now he's got himself a wife, and even a kid on the way. So this man, while riding on a train, writes the names Jason, Allen, Peter, Frank, and Louis in the margin of his newspaper. Now, *you* tell *me* what he meant."

Bland's eyes opened wide.

"You mean there was—there was *no* secret information?"

"Of course there wasn't! Koskoff gave up spying *years* ago—where would he get access to important secrets? He was riding that train into New York for some trivial reason, probably just to do some shopping or something. Anyway, he was about to become a father for the first time in his life, and like any man he was hoping his first-born would turn out to be a son, and all he was doing when one of your men murdered him was trying to decide what he wanted to name his child when it was born!"

"I—it wasn't one of my men," Bland said slowly.

"One of your government's, then. Can I go now?"

Captain Pold turned to Bland. There was a pained look in the Double-C man's eyes. He sighed, and nodded.

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"All right, Vic," Pold rasped, "you're free for now. But some day I'll get you."

"Good luck, Leo," Vic smiled.

"Vic?" Pold asked.

"Yeah?"

"It was a good try, anyway, wasn't it? I mean, the miniature waterproof receiver in the trout, and the fish suits and everything. It almost worked, didn't it? I had a case against you until this government business came up."

Vic Nelvet shot a grin at Bland and said, as he walked out of the cell, "Frankly, Leo, I thought the whole setup was kind of hokey."

"O"

CRIMINALIMERICKS

THE VELVET HAND

by D. R. BENSEN

As smooth as his self-chosen **name,**
He's carefully fostered his **fame**
As the crook with a dash
Who avoids stealing **cash,**
But comes out way **ahead all** the same.

CODE IN THE HEAD

by D. R. BENSEN

A codebreaker's **chief** satisfaction
Lies in thought, **not** especially in action;
But meddle **with Rand,**
Best of Double-**C's band,**
And you're liable to wind up in traction.

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a *NEW* Rand spy story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

And here, to complete the circle, is the newest Rand—the 23rd in this series of spy-and-counterspy adventures. We return to the land of the Pharaohs, to the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx, in a fascinating mixture of cipherology and pyramidology, and with, to quote from the author's letter accompanying the manuscript, "a spectacular climax that rivals a James Bond ending"...

THE SPY IN THE PYRAMID

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Do you remember Miss Leila Gaad?" Hastings asked, leaning forward across the desk. "The young archeologist from Cairo University who helped you in the Nile Mermaid affair?"

Rand nodded. "Of course. She was of great assistance." He still remembered her soft voice and blushing face, and the fleeting kiss she'd given him at one point in their adventure. "What about her?"

"She's part of a scientific party studying the Great Pyramid of Cheops. We think something's happening there, something that interests the Russians. A Red agent recently left London to join them in Egypt."

Rand perked up at this. "Do you know who?"

Hastings shook his head. "Our informant could only say that Moscow requested an Englishman who could pass himself off as an archeologist. We don't know who they sent, but if Russia has a man there, we should look into it too. When I heard Leila Gaad was a member of the party, you seemed the right man for the job."

"What about Double-C?"

Hastings smiled. "Concealed Communications can get along without you, at least for the

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short time you'll be away. That's one of the penalties you pay for building up such a fine staff."

Rand gave him no argument. The London weather was turning bad, and a few days in the company of Leila Gaad just might be fun.

Cairo in October was almost as hot and dry as Cairo in June, and the political climate had also changed little since Rand's last visit. He still saw Russians everywhere in the Egyptian capital—technicians and businessmen and occasional air-force officers—brought in to help the buildup against Israel. War seemed very close.

On the morning after his arrival Rand rented a car for the ten-mile drive to the Giza plateau west of the city. Crossing the Nile at the Giza Bridge he could already see the twin pyramids of Cheops and Kephren looming large on the horizon, and as he drew closer Mykerinos and the other smaller pyramids came into view.

Cheops was the largest pyramid in Egypt, a prize of ancient grave robbers and modern scientists. Looking now over the plateau on which the pyramids rested, Rand could see a group of native Egyptians toiling at its base. There was a scattering of tourists too, and off to one side a camp of canvas tents and desert vehicles that marked the party he sought. Rand stopped the first Englishman he encountered and asked, "Is Leila Gaad around? I'm an old friend."

The man was tall and slim, with the stony-faced look of an army officer. He studied Rand for a moment and then replied, "She's over by the Sphinx with some people."

There was something bizarrely casual about the way Rand crossed the stretch of sand to the classic statue of the lion-woman. Large as it was, the Sphinx seemed dwarfed by the nearby pyramids. Three people stood in its shadow, studying the great stone face with its broken nose. He recognized Leila at once, a small dark-haired girl with the pleasing high-cheekboned features he remembered so well.

"Hello there. Sorry to interrupt, but I thought I saw a familiar face."

She turned to him, smiling, and when she spoke it was the soft familiar voice he'd known more than once in his dreams. "Mr. Rand! So good to see you again!"

"I'm in Cairo for a few days, and the University said I could find you out here."

"Yes, we're hard at work.

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This is Sir Stafford Jones, a countryman of yours who's financing our project, and his wife Melinda."

Sir Stafford was a wispy middle-aged man who seemed worn out in contrast with the youthful vigor of his wife. Melinda was Leila's age, still under 30, and it developed they'd known each other slightly at Cairo University. She was Sir Stafford's second wife, and the marriage was new enough so that apparently he had not yet learned to cope with her youthful high spirits.

"Girl drags me over here to look at the Sphinx, Mr. Rand, and what does it mean? All I see is a lion with the head of a woman. What *does* it mean?"

Leila smiled. "The most likely explanation is that the Sphinx is half lion and half virgin, symbolizing the junction of the constellations Leo and Virgo in the fourth millennium B.C."

Melinda joined in, agreeing. "The Egyptians knew a great deal about the stars. Some say the Great Pyramid itself was a sort of observatory."

"That's one of the theories," Leila agreed, "though not one I favor."

"Just what is your work here?" Rand asked.

"Professor Danado is in charge. He's trying to continue the experiments of Dr. Luis Alvarez, the Nobel Prize winner, in recording the passage of cosmic rays through the pyramids. By the use of a computer to analyze the recorded tapes it's possible to discover the location of any unknown chambers."

"Interesting," Rand admitted.

"The threat of war put a stop to Dr. Alvarez's work, but Professor Danado obtained permission from the government to carry on. He's a fascinating man. You'll have to meet him."

When they'd returned together to the road Sir Stafford said, "Melinda and I must be getting back to our hotel."

Leila seemed disappointed. "So soon?"

"We'll be out again tomorrow," Melinda promised. "Good meeting you, Mr. Rand."

"Odd couple," Rand commented as they drove away.

"Mismatched," Leila agreed. "But he's paying the bills so I have to be nice to him. Now tell me how you are, Rand—you look simply smashing!"

"For a man past forty I'm holding up pretty well," he grinned. "Have you been swimming in the Nile lately?"

She made a face. "How did I ever let you talk me into that?"

"I have a way with pretty

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Scotch-Egyptian girls."

"You remembered!"

"My business is remembering. When can I meet your Professor Danado?"

"Right now. Come on."

"He's not the thin Englishman with the stone face, is he?"

"No, that's Roger Pullman, our foreman. He handles the native labor we use to string wires and such. You should see them climbing the side of that pyramid!"

She led Rand across the sand to the base of the Great Pyramid. Close up, he could see that the individual tiers of stone were of irregular height. But some were three feet or more, making a climb to the top a more difficult task than he'd imagined. "There are two hundred and one stepped tiers in all," Leila explained. "Want to try climbing?"

"No, thanks. It's really quite ugly close up, isn't it?"

"It wasn't always. The original covering was a full mantle of polished limestone, which must have been dazzling in the sunlight. But following some earthquakes in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, the Arabs stripped off the mantle and used the precious limestone to rebuild their cities and construct a number of mosques in Cairo. Without the limestone the core masonry has gradually weathered."

"You know a great deal."

She grinned at him. "My business is remembering, too. Come on, I'll take you inside and introduce you to Professor Danado."

He followed her up the side of the pyramid until he thought his legs would give out. She had actually gone up only 50 feet when they reached the entrance, but it was high enough for Rand. "You expect me to crawl through there?" he asked.

"It widens out farther along. Be careful, though. The descending passage has a slope of twenty-six degrees."

Somehow Rand managed to follow her down and then up, climbing like a monkey through the low narrow passageway. At one point there was a screech and fluttering of wings as something flew by his face. "What was that?"

"Just a bat," Leila reassured him. "These passages used to be full of them."

"Look," Rand gasped, "what are you doing to me?"

She held up her flashlight and smiled back at him. "Nobody comes to see me because they just happen to be passing by a pyramid, Rand. I know what your business is, remember? I'm the girl who swam the Nile and almost got

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herself killed for you. We've had some strange things going on here, and now you turn up. I want to know why."

"What sort of strange things?"

"Oh, an odd little Egyptian named Hassad showed up looking for a job with the work crew. We didn't need any more men so we sent him away. The very next day a stone fell on a workman and almost killed him. Hassad returned in less than an hour and got his job."

"Coincidence," Rand suggested. "Unless someone here wanted Hassad hired badly enough to drop the stone on the other man."

"Is that why you came? Is there an enemy here among us?"

"Enemy is a relative term. An enemy of what?"

They had emerged from the narrow ascending passage into the pyramid's Grand Gallery. It was still a steep climb, but now Rand could stand upright, admiring the high-ceilinged passageway lit by battery-operated torches. When they reached the King's Chamber at the top, two men were waiting for them. Leila made the introductions. "Professor Danado of Cairo University and another countryman of yours, Graham Larkey."

Larkey was a nondescript Englishman who would have looked more at home with a bowler hat and a cane. But it was Danado who focused Rand's attention. He was a tall bearded man who gave the impression of age and wisdom while seeming to hide a ripple of muscles that would have put most athletes to shame. Rand guessed him to be still in his thirties, and in perfect physical condition.

"Always glad to have visitors," Danado said, shaking Rand's hand with a firm grip. "We've been running wires here for weeks, but we're almost ready to begin."

"Just what are you doing?"

"We have a spark chamber in the lower vault, beneath the pyramid. It will record cosmic rays from outer space as they penetrate the pyramid walls. Computer analysis should pinpoint any unknown rooms or passages. Dr. Alvarez has been quite successful with the technique on other pyramids."

"It's a big place," Rand said, understating the obvious.

Graham Larkey coughed. "Big is hardly the word! There are two and a half million blocks of limestone and granite in this pyramid—enough to build a wall around France, as Napoleon once observed, or to construct all the churches in England."

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Professor Danado nodded. "Whatever its original use, as observatory, tomb, or temple of initiation, the builders performed an incredible task."

"It must have taken centuries," Rand decided.

"Only twenty years, according to Herodotus. But the manpower would have been fantastic."

After another hour inspecting the Queen's Chamber and the lower vault, Rand was eager for fresh air and daylight. They climbed down to the ground, with Larkey in the lead, and headed for the grouping of tents some hundred yards away. "Almost time for cocktails," the Englishman explained. "We must observe the amenities, you know."

The stone-faced man whom Rand had met earlier appeared from somewhere to talk in low tones with Professor Danado. After a moment Larkey joined them, leaving Rand alone with Leila Gaad. "When did Roger Pullman join your group?" he asked.

"We've only been here two weeks. Everyone came at the same time. I believe Pullman and Larkey arrived from England together. Do you think one of them—?" She was interrupted by Danado's return.

"Pullman says there's trouble with the work crew. I'll have to check on it. Meantime, Graham will furnish you with some fine London gin in his tent."

Graham Larkey prepared drinks for them, keeping up a constant flow of conversation about the pyramid. He even had a small wooden model, about a foot high, that he handed Rand for inspection. "Of course you can't tell too much from this," he said. "But the proportions and angles are correct."

"You really think there are more secret chambers?"

Larkey shrugged. "Danado is convinced of it." There was a growing roar from the sky above the tent, and Rand looked out to see a pair of Russian-built Egyptian jets streak by overhead, bound for the Cairo airport. "Don't mind the noise, Mr. Rand. We've got used to it."

"Of course you'll be staying the night," Leila said.

"I hadn't planned to," Rand replied.

"Nonsense! We have plenty of room. I've urged Sir Stafford and Melinda to stay too, but they must have their running water and other conveniences."

There was more talk while Larkey poured another batch of drinks, and presently Rand decided to stay the night. He was not unhappy at the prospect. Leila had managed to

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point out a dusky Egyptian workman who was the mysterious Hassad, and Rand decided it might be wise to keep an eye on him. If Hassad was an enemy agent he'd been placed there by somebody already present—most likely Pullman or Larkey, the only Englishmen on the scene.

Leila saw him to his tent at ten o'clock. "It's been a hard day. Sometimes we drive into Cairo for the evening, but after all that climbing you'd probably rather turn in."

"I think so," Rand agreed. "But I'll keep an eye open."

"Do you have a gun?"

"Will I need one?" he countered, not wanting to admit to the firm bulge under his armpit.

"I hope not."

"You mentioned strange happenings. What, besides the stone falling?"

She hesitated, then said, "All this wire strung up and down the pyramid. Dr. Alvarez's technique doesn't need that much wire."

"Have you asked Professor Danado about it?"

"No. I'm sure he has his reasons."

Rand nodded. "I'll see you in the morning."

He settled down to read a book about the pyramids by the light of his battery-powered lamp, but within an hour Leila was back at the flap of his tent. "It's Hassad," she whispered. "I saw him sneaking around. I think he's heading for Cairo."

Moving fast, Rand slipped a loose-fitting shirt over his holster and hurried across the sandy darkness. There was enough moonlight for him to make out the shadowy figure of Hassad some 50 feet ahead, moving toward the road. It seemed a simple task to trail the man, but suddenly the figure ahead of him vanished from view. Startled, Rand stopped dead, scanning the ground. Nothing moved. He went forward slowly.

Suddenly, a snakelike arm shot out, tackling him around the ankles, and Rand went down. Before he could free his gun the Egyptian was on him, tumbling him into a shallow excavation below the surface of the plateau. Rand saw the silver flicker of moonlight on a dagger's blade and jerked to one side as it descended.

He felt the steel slice through his shirt sleeve, then he got an arm free for a judo chop at his assailant's neck. Hassad grunted and dropped. Rand pulled himself free and stood up. When Hassad didn't move, he bent down to roll him over. The man was dead. He'd fallen on his own knife.

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Rand's first thought, in a business where no one could be trusted, was that Leila Gaad had lured him into a trap. He was still nursing that suspicion as he went quickly through Hassad's pockets. Then his probing fingers encountered a tube, a cigarette holder with something inside it. He dropped it into his pocket and headed back to the tents.

Leila was waiting for him. "What happened?"

"A little trouble. Hassad's dead."

"You killed him?"

"An accident. He came at me with a knife."

"Should we tell the others?"

Rand thought about it. "Better not. I don't particularly want to get hung up with the local police." He took out the metal cigarette holder and saw that it had a piece of paper rolled inside.

"What's that?" Leila asked.

"I found it on him."

He unrolled the paper and revealed a message, apparently in cipher: PMION CTRAD INGCA YDWEA LARTO IROAR RORSS EWERC EAAIR AKCCR EOVER BASES.

"Can you read it?"

"With time and a little luck. That's my business."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go back to your tent and get some sleep. And try to act surprised when they find Hassad's body in the morning."

When he was alone, Rand set to work on the cipher message before him. It appeared to be broken down into five-letter groups for transmission—a common practice—and the very fact that Hassad had been carrying it told him a great deal. The Egyptian was a courier, taking the message from someone at the pyramid to his superiors in Cairo, where it would no doubt be transmitted to Moscow. Hassad had tried to protect the message with his knife.

Rand stared down at the twelve groups of five letters each. Sixty letters in all. He checked the letter frequency first, and came up with 10 r's, 9 a's, 7 e's. But in such a short message, letter frequencies could be misleading. More interesting was the end of the message, where the words *over bases* appeared together. Coincidence?

After an hour's work Rand put the paper carefully away and went to bed. It was not as easy a job as he'd hoped.

He awoke before dawn and went back to work on the message, but still it would not yield its secret. When he heard the others moving about he

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joined them for breakfast, waiting for the workmen to discover Hassad's body. Over coffee and eggs Professor Danado was expounding some of the theories of pyramidology, including the somewhat far-fetched ideas of Menzies and Smyth. They were dining in Larkey's tent, and Danada said, "Hand me that pyramid model, Rand, and I'll show you what I mean."

Rand passed the wooden pyramid to him and Danado continued, "They believed that each of the passages, and the very dimensions of the pyramid, contained a chronological history of mankind. Some even claimed the Great Pyramid predicted the Second Coming of the Lord, and the end of the world."

"Rubbish!" Roger Pullman exclaimed, and Larkey nodded agreement.

As Rand listened to the talk Leila slipped into the seat at his side. She'd gone for a fresh pot of coffee and now she leaned over to whisper, "Hassad's body is gone."

Rand nodded, hoping she hadn't been overheard. Someone had decided to hide the body, for reasons of his own. He glanced down at the fingers of his left hand and saw a fine film of white dust. Sniffing, he was reminded of a schoolroom. He wondered why there'd been chalk dust on the side of Larkey's model pyramid.

Sir Stafford Jones and Melinda arrived promptly at 10:00 for what seemed to be their daily inspection of progress. While Danado showed them around, Rand prowled the campsite, seeking a likely place where Hassad's body might have been hidden. Finally he climbed up the side of the pyramid, resting every few tiers, and inspected the wires that Danado's crew had been stringing. The place would be perfect for transmitting short-wave radio broadcasts, but then so would the tall buildings in Cairo. It seemed unlikely that spies would wire the Great Pyramid simply to use it for a transmitting tower.

"Hello there—out for a stroll?"

He glanced down and saw Melinda Jones, fetching in a yellow pants suit, clambering over the stones below him. Rand held out a hand. "This is a tough climb."

She paused beside him, panting for breath. "Are you going all the way to the top?"

"Hardly! I'm just about done in."

"I can't imagine why my husband is so interested in a pile of stones!" She opened a

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fresh pack of cigarettes and lit one.

"Perhaps because it's the largest pile of stones in the world."

"You may be right. Stafford has always been attracted to superlatives."

"Even in women," Rand observed gallantly.

"Thank you, sir!" She dipped in a little bow.

"But yesterday you also seemed quite interested in this pile of stones, speculating on its use as an observatory and such."

"Oh, I'm interested in everything Stafford does. I wouldn't have married him otherwise. But he has a great deal of money and I only hope he's spending it wisely here."

They climbed higher, looking out across the sands at the buildings and mosques of Cairo. "A marvelous view," he said.

"Perhaps the ancient Egyptians thought they could see the whole world from the peak of the Great Pyramid."

After a time they went back down and found Professor Danado deep in conversation with Sir Stafford. They broke apart when Melinda and Rand approached, and the talk shifted to lighter topics. Whatever was going on here, Sir Stafford obviously did not want his wife involved. Rand said a few words and then drifted off to find Leila.

He found her checking measurements at the base of the pyramid, aided by an Egyptian workman. "I saw you up there with Melinda," she said.

"Nice girl. Wonder why she married Sir Stafford."

"Money and power. In college Melinda always wanted both."

Rand was inspecting some of the graffiti left by tourists along the base of the pyramid. "They write anywhere, don't they?"

"Graffiti has a long and honorable history here. Most of the early explorers left their names on the walls of the pyramid. Even Mercator, the mapmaker, carved his name in one of the inner chambers."

Rand waited until the workman had moved off and then asked, "Leila, what do you think is going on here?"

"I have no idea, except that it's unlike any other project I've ever been on. Professor Danado seems to assign me tasks like this just to keep me out of the way."

"What about Pullman and Larkey?"

"Pullman works with him, but not Larkey so much."

"Have you ever seen Larkey marking up his model pyramid with chalk?"

"No. Why?"

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"Just wondered. There was chalk dust on it this morning." He glanced toward the main tent and saw that Melinda and Sir Stafford were leaving. "Let's say goodbye to them," he suggested.

"Fine progress," Sir Stafford was saying. "Fine, fine!"

"I do hope it's finished soon," Melinda complained. "I can't wait to get back to London. My body just isn't suited to this heat." She turned to Roger Pullman. "Mr. Pullman, do you have a cigarette? I need something to revive me after climbing halfway up that pyramid."

"Certainly," he said, handing her one. But even Melinda's charms couldn't change the stony expression on his face.

"We'll be out again tomorrow," Sir Stafford assured them.

Danado nodded. "I should be just about ready then."

Rand watched them walk across the plateau to their waiting car. Melinda was talking to her husband, gesturing with the unlit cigarette, perhaps repeating her wish to return to London soon.

That evening, after an agreeable dinner with Danado and Leila and the two Englishmen, it was decided that Rand would spend another night with them. He knew he couldn't remain indefinitely without attracting even more suspicion than he already had, but he hoped that one more night would give him the time needed to crack the cipher message. In his tent he spread the paper out flat and scanned it once again:

PMION CTRAD INGCA
YDWEA LARTO IROAR
RORSS EWERC EAAIR
AKCCR EOVER BASES.

Sixty letters. He started writing them in columns, and after a moment a slow smile began to spread over his face.

"Rand!" Leila burst into his tent. "They've found Hassad's body. It was buried in the sand near one of the smaller pyramids."

"It doesn't matter now. My job is about finished."

"The cipher?"

He nodded. "Let's go see Professor Danado, Pullman, and Larkey."

They met in Danado's tent, where the lamps had been lit as dusk settled over the area. There was a new urgency about the professor, and his bearded face betrayed the hint of a troubled man.

"What do you know of Hassad's murder?" he asked Rand.

"It wasn't murder. He fell on his own knife while trying to kill me last night."

"And you hid the body?"

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"Someone else did that." Rand glanced toward Graham Larkey.

"Just what is your business here, Mr. Rand?"

"This." He laid the slip of paper down on the table before them.

Danado's eyelids shot up. "You can read this?"

"Yes."

"What does it say?"

Rand turned to Leila. "Could you get me the model pyramid out of Larkey's tent, please?"

The Englishman bristled. "What do you want my pyramid for?"

"To unscramble this message, the same way it was originally scrambled. You see, this is a transposition cipher rather than a substitution one. The letters retain their true identities but are merely mixed up. The chalk dust on the wooden sides of that model pyramid tipped me off that the model served as the device for enciphering the message. In most transposition ciphers the message is written in a square grid, and the letters are then read vertically instead of horizontally. Here the four sides of the pyramid were used—like this."

Rand began chalking the message on the side of the pyramid:

P
M I
O N C
T R A D
I N G C A

He turned the pyramid and did the same on the second side:

Y
D W
E A L
A R T O
I R O A R

The third side:

R
O R
S S E
W E R C
E A A I R

And the fourth:

A
K C
C R E
O V E R
B A S E S

"Now, we read it a line at a time, starting with the top letter *on each side*—P,Y,R,A. Then to the second line *on each side*—M,I,D,W,O,R,K,C. And so on. When all sixty letters are written in their correct order, and separated into the obvious words, we have a message that reads: *Pyramid work conceals secret radar tower covering Cairo area air bases.*"

"Very interesting," Professor Danado said quietly. His hand came from beneath the table, and it was holding a gun. "Now

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will you please raise your hands?"

Rand took a step backward and obeyed. He'd learned never to argue with a gun. "All right. You seem to have the upper hand."

Danado shifted the gun an inch to include Graham Larkey. "You too, Graham. Put up your hands."

"What is this?"

"Did you send this message?"

"I don't know a thing about it! What's this business about a radar tower?"

"A very clever plan," Rand interjected. "The Great Pyramid is, in a sense, a building more than forty stories high, towering over the city of Cairo. From this position radar could cover the movement of all aircraft, the firing of all missiles. Any radar in Israel is restricted, of course, by the natural curvature of the earth. Low-flying planes are safe from detection, except by radar units mounted on other aircraft. But a secret radar station hidden in the Great Pyramid would be an important weapon for Israel—the ultimate in espionage."

Larkey's mouth hung open. "Does he mean, Professor, that you're an Israeli agent?"

"I'm doing what has to be done. And what about you, Larkey? Did you write that message?"

"Hell, no! Pullman borrowed the model last night. Said he wanted to figure something out."

"Pullman?"

They suddenly realized that Pullman was no longer with them. He'd slipped out at the very beginning of Rand's explanation. "Put that gun away," Rand told Danado. "I may not be with you, but I'm certainly not against you. If Pullman is the spy—"

He was interrupted by the blaring of an auto horn from somewhere on the road. Danado hesitated only an instant before pocketing the gun. "No tricks, Rand! Let's see what's happening."

Outside, in the hazy twilight close to night, they saw two figures running from the road. Rand recognized Sir Stafford and Melinda. "Take cover!" Sir Stafford shouted. "The Egyptians know everything! Army units are right behind us!"

As if to punctuate his words, a line of fast-moving troop carriers came into view on the road, their spotlights scanning the desert plateau. From one of the other tents a figure appeared, and Rand saw that it was Roger Pullman. He carried an army .45 automatic and there was a look of triumph on

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his usually stony face. "Stay right there!" he shouted. "You're prisoners of the Egyptian government."

Professor Danado, stepping behind Rand, pulled his gun from his pocket. He fired twice as Pullman's first shot went wild, and dropped the Englishman in his tracks.

"Good shooting!" Sir Stafford exclaimed.

"But I don't like being used as a shield," Rand grumbled.

Melinda ran over to the body. "He's dead. Was he a spy?"

"You should keep your wife better informed," Danado told Sir Stafford.

"The less she knew, the better. Sorry, dear." He glanced over his shoulder. "Those army units seem to be surrounding us. Any suggestions, Professor?"

Danado debated only an instant. "To the pyramid! We'll be safe in there from small-arms fire and they wouldn't dare use artillery on it."

They ran toward the towering pyramid, Melinda and Leila in front, followed by Graham Larkey. Rand, Sir Stafford, and Danado were bunched together at the rear, as if none wanted to present his back to the others.

"That was good work on the cipher," Danado admitted as they reached the pyramid and started the climb to the entrance. "Too bad you didn't come up with it sooner, before Pullman sent it."

"I stopped Hassad from delivering the first message," Rand said. "But there must have been a second one."

They stared down from the pyramid at the line of troop carriers and half-tracks taking up positions around them. An amplified voice cut suddenly through the night. "The Egyptian government calls upon you to surrender at once as enemies of the state!"

"Now what?" Sir Stafford asked Danado.

The bearded professor did not answer. Instead he knelt on a slab of stone and took careful aim with his pistol. He fired at the nearest spotlight and hit it squarely. As the light died there was an answering burst of small-arms fire from below. A bullet zinged off the rocks above Rand's head. Then there was a barked command from below and the firing ceased.

"They'll send troops up the other sides to encircle us," Danado decided. "We can go inside, but we've no way out."

"Al-Mamun's passage," Larkey suggested. "That's below us."

"They know about that. They're Egyptians, remember? This is their thing." Danado

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took aim and hit another spotlight. This time there was no answering fire.

"There's one way out," Rand said. "Get on that radio."

Danado frowned. "What radio?"

"This is no time for games. You must have short-wave contact with Israel. Otherwise what good would a secret radar station be?"

"You're right, of course," Danado admitted.

"Tell them we need help."

"What can they do? Start a war just to save us?"

"Remember that commando raid by helicopter last year? They carried off a whole Egyptian radar station from Shadwan Island. Maybe they can get us out."

"Rand, we're ten miles west of Cairo!" Danado protested.

"It's that or spend a few years rotting in an Egyptian jail."

Danado drew in his breath and nodded. "Take this," he said, handing Rand the gun. "Use it if they start up this side of the pyramid, toward us or al-Mamun's passage. I'll be back." He retreated down the shaft into the heart of the pyramid.

"I'm scared," Melinda said. "How in the world did I get involved in this?"

"All my fault," Sir Stafford said. "I've been financing this project on behalf of Israel. But I couldn't let you know. It had to look like a scientific project, to keep the Egyptians from getting suspicious."

"What about Pullman?" Larkey asked. "Who was he?"

"A spy in the pay of the Russians," Rand explained. "That's what brought me here."

"But what made the Russians suspicious in the first place? The radar station isn't even in use yet."

"That's a very interesting question," Rand admitted.

There was a crackling from below and then another call on the loudspeaker for their surrender. Rand fired a shot in the air, just to keep them on their toes. He hoped they'd wait till daylight to storm the pyramid, but he knew it was a dim hope.

Suddenly Danado was back, panting for breath. "They'll do what they can," he said. "We're to climb to the top."

"All the way?"

"All the way. We'd better get started."

It was a difficult climb in the dark, made even more difficult with the women along. Before they had gone halfway they could hear the first soldiers starting up after them. Rand was beginning to sweat, helping Leila over the tiers of stone

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while the others helped Melinda. "How much farther?" he gasped to Danado after they'd been climbing nearly an hour.

"My count makes this the one hundred and seventy-eighth tier, and there are two hundred and one in all. Let's rest here and then go on to the top."

Behind them, still far down, there was a scrambling over stone. "They think they've got us cornered," Larkey said.

"If those helicopters don't come they'll be right." Sir Stafford scanned the eastern sky, but there were no lights visible.

"You mean we're going to have to go up rope ladders or something after a climb like this?" Melinda moaned.

"I only hope we get the chance," Danado replied. "Egyptian jails can be unpleasant. Come on, rest period's over."

Slowed down by the effects of the climb it took them nearly half an hour more to reach the top. Then, standing on what seemed the roof of the world, Rand felt more helpless than ever. The climbing below them seemed to have stopped, but now new and more powerful searchlights had arrived and were sweeping their beams across the face of the pyramid.

Then suddenly a sound of sirens reached their ears, coming from the direction of Cairo. "Air raid," Danado said. "This may be it!"

As they stood waiting, four men and two women atop the Great Pyramid of Cheops, Rand heard at last the whirling of blades above their heads. "Helicopters coming in!"

Two large troop-carrying copters emerged from the night and hovered above them, rotors chopping at the air. There were a few shots from the ground, but they were high enough to be out of accurate range. A light shone down from the nearest copter, and a rope ladder snaked down.

"We're going up," Danado said. "Ladies first."

The troops on the ground had stopped firing, but only because jet interceptors were already taking off from the nearby air base. Rand could see their fiery tails as his turn came to climb the rope ladder. He wondered if this would be his end, hanging here in the sky above a pyramid.

But he made it to the shelter of the helicopter along with the others and stretched out panting on the floor. "Good show," an Israeli with a British accent told them. "Didn't think you'd make it."

"We haven't made it yet," Sir Stafford advised him.

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"Those are Egyptian jets out the side window."

The jets moved in close, but did not open fire. They seemed to be waiting for something. Rand pulled Leila close and whispered in her ear. He was taking a chance, and he hoped he was right.

Suddenly, as the helicopters turned northeast toward home, Melinda Jones made her move. She yanked open the door of the pilot's compartment and pointed a tiny gun. "We're not going back to Israel," she announced. "We're landing at Cairo airport."

"Melinda! What in hell is this?" Sir Stafford took a step forward and she turned the gun on him. In that moment, her face grim with determination, Rand really believed she would shoot her husband.

But then Leila pounced on her back, fists flying, knocking the gun aside and forcing Melinda to the copter's floor. Rand moved in to scoop up the gun.

"Tell them you're landing," he ordered the pilot. "But when the jets start down, reverse yourself and take off, straight up. At their speed they won't be able to turn quickly enough to follow."

The man obeyed instructions, and the craft shot suddenly upward with the second helicopter following. A burst of antiaircraft fire hit near enough to jar them, but then suddenly the skies seemed quiet.

"What about Melinda?" Sir Stafford asked. "I can't believe it!"

"I think you'll find she was planted by the Russians, sir. If you'll pardon me, you were just the right age to be looking for a young wife. With your reputation for financing causes she must have been suspicious of this pyramid thing. She needed an agent on the inside, actually part of the group, so she asked the Russians for help and they sent Pullman. He, in turn, arranged for Hassad to carry messages to Melinda in Cairo. The cipher message was meant for her, after Pullman had learned about the secret radar station."

"How did you know?" Danado asked. "You warned Leila to jump her when she pulled the gun."

"When the firing stopped I figured it meant one of their people was aboard. That meant she'd try to force us to land. As for it being Melinda, consider the facts. Someone told the Russians to send Pullman. Someone got Pullman's second message and told the Egyptians tonight. But how did Pullman deliver the message after Hassad

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died and Pullman hid the body?

"Well, Hassad had the first message rolled up in a cigarette holder. Pullman simply varied the technique slightly and rolled the second message in a cigarette. You'll remember that Melinda asked him for a cigarette today at the pyramid, even though I'd seen her just open a fresh pack of her own. *And then she didn't light it!* She carried it unlit in her hand. That had to contain the second message."

"Smart," Melinda said from the floor. "But you're not out of it yet."

"Yes, we are," Danado corrected her. "We've just crossed Suez. We're safe now."

"But you didn't win!" she spat. "You didn't get your damned radar station!"

"Neither side won," Danado agreed. "Another draw decision in a long and fruitless war."

Rand walked to the front of the copter where Leila sat. "Are you all right?"

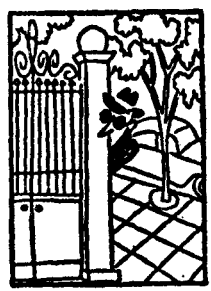
"I guess so. This time was worse than swimming the Nile."

"Sorry about that."

"And they probably won't let me back into Egypt."

"We have some fine old ruins in England," he said, "if you want to try them sometime."

She smiled up at him. "I just might do that."



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a *NEW* "strange" story by

CELIA FREMLIN

Oh, what a special quality Celia Fremlin has!... Which do you believe in? Death in life? Life in death? Or in both?... another haunted and haunting story by a writer whose work is always fascinating, thought-provoking, and the end, however elusive the deeper meaning, touching...

THE COLDNESS OF A THOUSAND SUNS

by CELIA FREMLIN

How warm the water still was, after nearly 30 years! Through the shallow pools left by the falling tide her feet slid, white and mysterious in the starlight, like some strange new species of fish. Quiet, too, just the way fish are quiet; scarcely a ripple stirred the stillness of the summer night as she waded softly on, across the dark sands which had once been golden in the noonday heat as her children scampered across them all those years ago, those many years ago.

"Mummy!" they had shrieked, "Mummy, look! Look at my starfish... Look at my castle, it's much bigger than Janie's castle, isn't it?... Mummy, look, is this a hermit crab? ... Look at my shell, Mummy, it's all pink inside! Look, Mummy, look!"

Oh, she had been a goddess then: dispenser of buns and knowledge and ginger beer; provider of towels for shivering little bodies; comforter of bruised toes; inventor of enchanted games. She had known then what it was to reign over sea and sand and summer. She had been "Mummy."

Now her fingers tightened round the bottle of pills in the pocket of the thick winter coat she had chosen, summer though it was, to come here and die in. A winter coat, and once she had worn so little and had run

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across the sands with her squealing children: "I can race you, Mummy! Look, Mummy, look, I can run faster than you can!"

And then the sandwiches and the crisps and the fizzy drinks, and after that the guessing games and the story games as they lay, drunk with sunshine, in the hot sandy hollow mid the marram grass. She remembered the feel of sand and salt drying on her skin in the benign, endless afternoon heat; she remembered how the damp, sandy little bodies pressed up closer: "Another story, Mummy! *Please*, Mummy, just one more!"

And now the voices were silent, her children vanished; grown, long since, into mere people, as surely as if they had died. And she was Mummy no longer, and the glory had gone from her. She was an aging woman, a nuisance to her doctors who could do no more for her, and to her friends whose sympathy for her eternal aches and pains was beginning to wear thin.

The pain! Aaaah, it was coming back now—not just the weary gnawing that went on all the time, but a heavy bloated agony that twisted her over double, brought her to a standstill. Oh, God, oh, God, no, no! Oh, please! Clutching herself in a half hoop, she saw her white quivering feet, with the water trembling over them; swollen, grotesque, like the intensity of pain itself.

And then the spasm passed, grew weaker, and she straightened up again. Now that it had gone away, she was glad—yes, glad—that the pain had returned, if only for a minute. For it had been strange the way it had ceased completely, for a whole afternoon, once she had decided to make an end to it. Just the way a tooth stops aching the very moment you step into the dentist's waiting room.

It had shaken her resolve, this eerie cessation of pain, after all the unrelenting months of it. The absence had left room for the fear of death to come flooding back, and she had sat in the cheap boardinghouse lounge, her winter coat already on, and had cried with the uncertainty and the fear of it all. And then it was evening, and she didn't go in to dinner; and presently there were her landlady and the woman from the first floor back, asking her what was the matter? "Nothing," she'd said, and had to turn her tear-stained face away and fuss with her handbag. Nothing, nothing at all; she was just going out to post a letter, that's all, before turning in.

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Under the pitying, guarded gaze of both of them she had managed to get herself out of the front door; and then, somehow, there was no turning back. On, on, past the last of the dark houses, past the straggling beach huts, past the silent, salty little pleasure boats, upended under the stars. Soon her feet were gliding over the gray glimmering sand left by the falling tide, and she had known that she would never rest, now, until she had reached the Place.

The Place.

Our Place. The picnic place. The hollow in the sandhills sacred to Us.

Us? There is no such thing now. We are gone, finished. Gone like all the summer noondays of the vanished years. There is no Us now, there is only me, a dreary middle-aged woman, riddled with death, padding through the dark still-warm shallows, dragging herself here, here to Our Place, to die.

Nothing had changed. Even in the darkness of the moonless night she recognized the slope of dry sand and sea thistle that led up to the dunes. Black against the stars, she could see the spiked marram grass, could hear its dry whispering in the night air. Once it had been astir with insects, with galloping children, under the blazing August sky.

All gone. The sun, the children, the insects of long ago. The dry powdery sand, once so warm to bare brown holiday feet, was cold now, cold like death; and the marram grass, as it stirred and rustled against her calves, was cruel in the darkness, sharp and vicious against her flabby aging skin.

And how cold, cold Our Place had become after 30 years! Bare, like a crater on the moon, and only eight feet wide! The marram grass on the rim bent stiffly to her passing, then raised itself and seemed to watch, grave and hostile, as she slithered and stumbled down to the very heart and center of Our Place.

Once there she sat down in the darkness; and the coldness of the soft deep sand sent a shudder of foolish dismay along her thighs. Somehow she had not thought that the warmth would be *all* gone, but it was. Our Place knew her no more.

Well, and why should it? Why had she imagined it would still welcome her after all the years? She, who had once brought laughter here and delicious food and happy sunburnt children—now, she was bringing to Our Place only death, and her pain-racked body.

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She was a pollution, a blasphemy, a sin against the golden days that were gone.

And yet . . . The impulse to die in the place where one has truly lived is strong in all of us. So she stayed sitting there, right in the center of Our Place, just where she had once sat in her glory, dispensing chocolate and ideas for games and bottles of lemonade. Now she took from her coat pocket a bottle of plain water. It gleamed eerily in the starlight, and the water glugged and gurgled as she swallowed it, mouthful by mouthful, with one handful after another of the long blue pills. And when she had finished them all, she lay back on that same soft deep sand where she had once basked, and waited for death to come.

She could hear the tide, at its lowest ebb now, murmuring far off in the darkness across the flat sands; and as the pain ebbed slowly, and for the last time, from her tormented body, she could almost imagine she heard her children's voices, far off, playing at the water's edge. And as the night breeze moaned above her she could almost fancy beyond her closed eyelids the hot blue sky blazing.

And this strange drowsy warmth stealing over her, it was like the warmth of the sun. No, of a thousand suns, the suns of all the long-dead summer days, beating down upon her from far, far away across the years . . .

"Mummy! Mummy! Wake *up*! We're *starving!* You've been asleep for so *long!*"

Their laughter, their mock reproaches, broke through the strange light feeling in her head. Damp, eager little hands were tugging at her, urging her into a sitting position; shrill voices clamored in her ears.

Dazed, almost incredulous with joy, she shook the sleep from her eyes. What a ghastly dream! Thank goodness the kids wakened her before it had got any worse! For a few moments she lay still, ignoring their clamor, and gave herself up to the incredible sensation of being *young!* Of having a body that was *well!* The miraculous, unbelievable sensation of health, of organs working exactly as they should, all of them, in magical, effortless harmony.

"*Mummy!* You *said* we could have the picnic straight after our swim! You *promised!* Oh, Mummy, come *on!*"

And slowly, still dizzy with sun and sleep, and with a stupefying sense of relief, she scrambled to her feet, the dry powdery sand scattering this way and that from her

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sun-warmed limbs. How marvelous her body felt, so strong, so lithe, and with only the ridiculous barrier of a bikini between it and the glory of the sun!

And now she was standing up; and as she stood there, her littlest child, her berry-brown little four-year-old, ran up, squealing with excitement.

"Look, Mummy!" she cried, "look, everybody! I'm going to go bye-bye in the sand, like Mummy did!" And so saying, she flopped down onto the patch of sand her mother had just vacated, then leaped up, as if she had been stung.

"Mummy! Mummy! It's so *cold* where you've been lying! Mummy, why is it so cold?"

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The first published fiction of Francis M. Nevins, Jr. appeared in the May 1972 issue of EQMM. It was a subtle and unusual pastiche titled "Open Letter to Survivors." Now, in his second story, Mr. Nevins steps out on his own, boldly and completely on his own. Meet a new detective character—Loren Mensing, a professor of law (as is his creator) on temporary assignment to the Police Commissioner's office as Deputy Legal Adviser... Presumably, after this case, Professor Mensing will return to his teaching duties. Will there be crimes on campus? Will Professor Mensing take charge?... We have a strong hunch there will be and the professor will, and we look forward to his elucidations...

AFTER THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

When Loren Mensing got home it was almost 2:00 o'clock Saturday morning. He stabbed his key into the lock, slammed the apartment door behind him, threw his tie and jacket in a heap on the sofa, and began nibbling leftovers as he mixed himself a drink. He expected the worst. For twelve hours the biggies had debated how to handle next week's anti-war demonstrations. Bosley, the chief of the Tactical Force, was in the mood to break heads. Mensing's arguments about constitutional rights and the undesirability of open warfare on the city's streets won few converts. Nothing had been settled and a final conference was called for Monday morning. Mensing wished fervently that his sabbatical were over so that he could retreat to the sweet peace of his law professorship.

Sipping his second highball, he noticed the letter. It lay on the scatter rug just inside the front door. Apparently, as so often happened in these high-rise buildings, the mailman had dropped it

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in the wrong slot down in the lobby and the person who got it had slipped it under Mensing's door.

Picking it up, he saw that it was addressed to him at the old apartment near the law school, which was still listed in the phone book as his residence. Printed in the envelope's upper left corner were TELEFILM ENTERPRISES, INC. and a city address. He tore the envelope open and adjusted his glasses. Beneath the letterhead and his own name and former address he read:

Dear Mr. Mensing:

Last summer when you became Deputy Legal Adviser to the Police Commissioner's office and the local station interviewed you, you mentioned that as a boy back in the Forties you loved the great action and adventure movie serials, and that you wished they'd be shown on TV. I hope then that you'll recall The Thunder Men series with Jon Nordeen and Lana Marra that I produced and directed in those golden days? Of course I retired from active moviemaking long ago; all this company of mine does is sell syndicated series to TV stations. But I love the past like my own dead children, and sometimes I screen an old serial to get me through the long and lonely evenings.

Two nights ago I ran The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion, the last of The Thunder Men stories, which I made in 1944. You'll remember that poor Jon Nordeen was murdered in his home right after shooting was completed. That unsolved crime has haunted me ever since. But suddenly, now that I've screened the serial, I think, I think, I may have the key to that crime's solution. And if I'm right I don't know what to do.

I am inviting a small number of the people who were involved in making The

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Thunder Men serials to a private screening in my office at 1:00 P.M. this coming Sunday. I invite you, in a purely unofficial capacity, to join us, and to favor us with your comments, and to give me some guidance on how to proceed.

I look forward to meeting you over the weekend.

Sincerely yours,
Spencer English

And suddenly Loren Mensing was young again, was the fat, near-sighted, squeaky-voiced adolescent who sat enraptured in dim cavernous movie palaces on Saturday afternoons as the rites of fast action and derring-do exploded on the screen. Images of boyhood heroes raced through his mind—The Three Mesquiteers, Wild Bill Elliott, Spy Smasher, The Thunder Men.

He plucked Alan G. Barbour's *Days of Thrills and Adventure* and Raymond William Stedman's *The Serials* from his shelves and refreshed his recollection of The Thunder Men and their abrupt extinction in mid-career. The first three chapter-plays in the series were *The Thunder Men Strike* (1941), *The Thunder Men Strike Again* (1942), and *The Thunder Men Return* (1943). All were produced and directed by Spencer English who, judging by the photographs of him in Barbour's book, was a short, frail, painfully thin and studious-looking man rated by both Barbour and Stedman as one of the greatest action film makers of all time.

The series starred Jon Nordeen as Lance King, who created The Thunder Men organization to rid the Old West of legalized oppression, and beautiful Lana Marra as The Flame, the girl outlaw leader who fought at King's side against the evil ones they both hated. The storylines were merely pegs on which to hang some of the most exhilarating action scenes ever filmed—wild chases, desperate fights, hair's-breadth escapes, spectacular scenes of bloodless destruction. All the serials had been scripted by Tulliver Warde and had been graced with outrageously exuberant agitato musical scores by Gustave Wenzel.

Barbour mentioned that rumors of an offscreen romance between Nordeen and Marra added a certain piquancy to their cinematic exploits, but if Mensing had heard such rumors in his adolescence he would have been much annoyed, since at that time

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Lana Marra had been the private goddess of his fantasies and he would share her with no one, not even with Jon Nordeen.

Stedman's volume added that Nordeen had volunteered for military service after completing *The Thunder Men Return*, had been with Marine Intelligence in the Pacific, been wounded and discharged, had returned to the States to make another serial, *The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion*, and was mysteriously shot to death in his cliffside bachelor bungalow a few days after the filming had been completed.

The last serial was released posthumously, and hundreds of thousands of American youngsters (including, Mensing remembered with a shock, himself) had watched its fifteen- to twenty-minute segments on Saturday afternoons over the next three months in a kind of fragmented mass wake. That was the end of The Thunder Men, although a few years later the studio tried with the aid of new stars to update the series, making The Thunder Men a secret organization of good guys fighting escaped Nazi war criminals. It had been a thumping flop.

Mensing closed the books, threw off his clothes to take a hot shower, then fell into bed, dog-tired but with the prospect of an interesting weekend before he had to face the grim realities of Monday and Bosley. He slept till eleven and cooked himself a heavy brunch, and it was early afternoon before he decided to take a chance and call Spencer English at home, hoping for a sneak preview of what was in store. He got the number from the directory, dialed, and a voice he knew growled, "Hello?"

It was Lieutenant Ellsworth, Homicide Division. Mensing thought of him as "Batman" Ellsworth because of his incessant communion breakfast orations on the theme of the police as the thin blue line between order and atheistic anarchy.

"Ellsworth, what are you doing there?" Mensing demanded.

"Is that you, Mincing?" Deliberately mispronouncing the name, Mensing had decided months ago, was Ellsworth's private way of calling the Police Commissioner's Deputy Legal Adviser a Maoist faggot. "I'm here officially. Runt named Spencer English that lived here got himself strangulated with some picture wire last night between ten and midnight. What are you calling for?"

Mensing explained briefly and was half politely ordered to come out to English's house at once and bring the dead man's letter with him. Forty minutes later he braked his VW beetle behind a police car in front of the late director's fieldstone rancho.

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Since no other official vehicles were in sight, Mensing deduced that the body and the Departmental technicians had left. Inside, only Ellsworth, Sergeant Hough, and two uniformed men remained. Mensing and Ellsworth sat in the living room, surrounded by autographed photos of cowboy stars of the Forties.

"None of the neighbors saw anything or heard anything," Ellsworth concluded. "No prints found that don't belong. No way we can trace the picture wire. The woman that comes in to clean—same one that found the body this morning—we had her look around and she couldn't see anything missing. Victim was a widower in his middle sixties, both his children dead, no close relatives, well fixed financially, and his will leaves everything in trust for scholarships to the UCLA film department. So your letter's the best lead I've got, and I'm going to assume for now that whoever killed this Nordeen character killed English, too, probably to shut his mouth. Come on with me."

"Where?"

"Down to Telefilm Enterprises. I don't know zip about these old serials—I was busy killing Krauts in the 1940's. You call yourself an expert, and I need an expert to go through English's office with me and see who else got a letter like yours."

Telefilm Enterprises, Inc. took up a corner office on the 21st floor of a turn-of-the-century commercial building downtown. A cramped knotty-pine reception room, a work area with two secretarial desks each equipped with an electric typewriter, a tacky private office with SPENCER ENGLISH on the door, a tiny ten-seat screening room, its dirty window concealed by thick black drapes—that was all.

They found the carbons of the letters under English's desk blotter, all neatly typed on an IBM Electric, the same model as the two machines in the outer office. There were five carbons, including the one of the letter sent to Mensing. Picking up one at random Mensing read:

Mr. Gustave Wenzel
206 Pryor Lane
Coast City 90271

Dear Gus:

I was screening The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion here the other night and I

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think I saw something that throws light on who murdered poor Jon back in '44, but now I don't know if I was seeing things or not, and I need some other opinions. I'm running the thing again here Sunday at 1:00 P.M. Please make it if you can, Gus. I don't know what the hell to do.

It was signed "Spence." Mensing picked up another letter.

Mrs. Bertrand Harbage
1471 Center Court, Apt. 12-D
Coast City 90271

Dear Lana:

When I was running The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion here the other night, I stumbled across something I think may be a clue to the murder of Jon Nordeen, back when you were young and I was, well, in middle life anyway. This Sunday at 1:00 P.M. I'm going to screen the picture here again. Please come if you possibly can. I need to know if I really saw what I think I saw, or whether I'm going blind as well as senile. My love to Bertie.

It, too, was signed "Spence," as were two more letters, one ddressed to Mr. Tulliver Warde, in the city, and the other to Mr. ino Sarpi, in an oceanside suburb. Sarpi, Mensing recalled, had een one of the great movie stunt men of the Thirties and Forties, second Yakima Canutt. Mensing hadn't realized that Sarpi had een in The Thunder Men serials; he wondered if the man had oubled for Nordeen or Lana Marra, or both.

"You know who any of these people are?" Ellsworth grunted.

Mensing gave him a thumbnail sketch of the role each had layed in The Thunder Men series. "Lana Marra was supposed to ave been in love with Nordeen," he concluded. "I've always ondered what happened to her after he died; all I knew was that ne'd left movies. I gather from this letter she wound up marrying

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someone named Bertrand Harbage, whom I've never heard of."

"We keep coming back to the damn bang-bang movies, don't we?"

"Why, don't you like the old serials?"

"Hell, no. I'm against violence," said Lieutenant Ellsworth. "But the point is that if these people who worked on the serials with English are the only ones he told about what he thought he saw, then I'm betting one of them must have strangulated him. *And* shot Nordeen too."

"Yes, but of course one of these recipients might have happened to pass the news to someone else, to the person who actually killed Nordeen, and *that* person killed English," Mensing suggested. "It's a possibility we can't dismiss."

"We'll check it out. Hey, Charlie!" Ellsworth bellowed toward the screening-room doorway. "You find the film can yet that ha The Thunder Men thing in it?"

Sergeant Hough stuck his thinning carrot top through the opening. "It wasn't in the storage cabinet with all the other fillun cans, Skipper, but I just now found it." He held out three battleship-gray metal cylinders. "They were taped to the underside of the bottom shelf of the cabinet with heavy masking tape so no one could see them. And that ain't the only funny thing I found there. I—"

"You found signs that someone had been searching through th cabinet before you, right?" Mensing interrupted.

"A Perry Mason yet," Ellsworth snorted.

But Hough nodded. "You hit it, Mr. Mensing."

"Nothing spectacular," Mensing said. "I just thought that Nordeen's murderer would go to the trouble of killing English he'd probably also try to get hold of the film from which Englis apparently derived his clue. Luckily English had the prudence t conceal the film after he'd made his discovery. It wouldn't tak any special skill to break into this office, I'd guess."

"Like child's play," Hough said. "The front door could b opened with a paper clip, and the old geezers they hire for nigh men in these buildings are asleep half the time they're on duty.

"So we can safely assume that our man or woman paid a vis here," Mensing said. "You can have the lab men check the plac for prints, Ellsworth, but I doubt it'll do you any good. Righ now, though, I want you to round up the girls who work here an find out if any of them typed the five letters in this sheaf."

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"The point being?" Ellsworth asked.

"You'll notice that none of the five bears the customary secretarial initials at the lower left. I conclude that English typed these himself. But I'd like verification."

"You'll get it. Charlie, find the secretaries' names and addresses n the files and get going on it. Any other ideas?"

"Several. I want your men to go around to the recipients of hese letters and find out if any of them passed the information to n outsider. Don't forget to check out Mr. Bertrand Harbage along vith the actual recipients. And I want you to have all of them ssemble here tomorrow at 1:00 P.M. for a special screening of *The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion.*"

"And where will you be while I'm doing all this?" Ellsworth uizzed sarcastically. "Knocking off early today?"

"Why, I'll be right here, previewing the serial," said Mensing, lmost smacking his lips, "and trying to spot what Spencer English aw."

They drafted one of the projectionists who ran training films at he Police Academy for weekend service, and within an hour oren Mensing was sitting in the stuffy darkness of the screening oom, stripped of several thousand yesterdays, his blood pounding ith the ceaseless action and furious music.

The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion was set in an immense act of land claimed by both the United States and Mexico but nder the control of neither, legal and political power being in the ands of a megalomaniac named Colonel Cain whose policies cluded slave labor, torture, a private Gestapo (the Legion of the tle), and confiscatory taxation of the peasants. Early in the serial ance King and The Flame stumbled into this domain, were rested, then enslaved in Cain's underground mine. They escaped, egan to organize a revolution, shaped the peasants into a fighting rce, and, unlike most of history's rebel generals, found emselves an inch from death every time they joined battle with en the smallest enemy force, until at the spectacular climax the volutionaries invaded and destroyed Cain City.

When the screening was over, more than four hours after the hts had first gone out, Mensing had learned nothing about the urders of Jon Nordeen and Spencer English; but he had learned a eat deal about himself.

Suddenly realizing that he had not eaten since morning, he

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locked up the office, told the projectionist to come back at one the next day, took the elevator down, and walked east three blocks to a smorgasbord place he knew. After dinner he decided he needed to walk off the heavy meal. Half an hour later he was at Headquarters with his feet up on a chair and aching like open wounds. He read through the reports of the afternoon's interrogations, which made the creators of the serial begin to come alive for him as individuals.

Wenzel, Gustave. For the past 20 years he had been teaching music at a junior high school in the city. Like English he was a widower, but unlike English he was a grandfather. The musician and the director had maintained a slight acquaintance but Wenzel claimed he had not seen English for more than a month before receiving the invitation letter. He had phoned English at Telefilm Enterprises and said he would come. He had told no one of the letter.

Sarpi, Dino. Living on social security and a pension in a small beachfront cottage. The interviewing officer noted that he was in superb physical condition for a man in his sixties, certainly powerful enough to strangle a man with picture wire. Sarpi stated that he had seen almost nothing of Spencer English in recent years but that he had kept up some ties with Lillian Harbage (better known as Lana Marra), for whom he had doubled in the Forties. When he received the letter from English he had called Mrs. Harbage and learned that she, too, had been invited. He had later called English and agreed to attend the screening.

Harbage, Lillian. Screen name: Lana Marra. Married since 195[illegible] to Bertrand Harbage, a British national and BOAC executive working out of the company's West Coast office. One son presently attending prep school in Dorsetshire. Mrs. Harbage had left movies after the death of Jon Nordeen and worked as a secretary for several years until her marriage to Mr. Harbage. She admitted to having seen Spencer English once or twice at cocktail parties since her husband had been transferred last year from the London office, but had not seen or heard from him for at least two months, mainly because the Harbages had just finished moving from their fifth-floor apartment to more spacious quarters on the twelfth floor of the same building and Mrs. Harbage had been too busy redecorating to attend her usual round of parties. She had shown the interviewing officer her letter from English, had confirmed Sarpi's story of his phone call to her, had no

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contacted English to say she would or would not attend his screening. She had not mentioned English's letter to her husband until noontime Saturday when she heard the news of the murder on the radio, but the letter had been lying around the apartment in plain sight and Mr. Harbage might well have seen it. Mr. Harbage had denied all knowledge of the matter prior to Saturday noon. The Harbages had had separate engagements Friday evening and neither could provide an airtight alibi for the crucial hours.

Warde, Tulliver. The officer had found no one to interview at the address on the upper left of the carbon of English's letter to his former scriptwriter. It was an apartment deep in the black ghetto, now stripped clean of everything but roaches. The officer suspected that some brand of black militance had been brewing at the address. An APB had been put out.

Parks, Jean, and *Donahue, Diane.* The Telefilm Enterprises secretaries had stated positively to the interviewing officer that they had typed no invitations to any Sunday screening.

Mensing took a cab home but slept fitfully, anticipating the next day when he would meet in the flesh the people he had begun to know a quarter of a century before.

One P.M. and there they sat, fidgeting in the light from the overheads in the screening room. Mensing stood in front of them, blocking the empty screen with his bearish bulk. He had chatted briefly with each of them as they came in, but to them he was some kind of police bureaucrat and to him they were suspects. What they had meant to him worlds ago, they would never know.

Dino Sarpi sat at the extreme left of the front row, tall, bronzed, long-limbed, his face wrinkled as a monkey's above bushy gray hair. Mensing guessed that beneath his shiny serge suit were the scars of many spills.

Next to Sarpi was Bertrand Harbage, a chubby pink-faced cherub with snow-white hair and heavy-rimmed glasses, dressed in conservative British tweeds. Every minute or so he would give a reassuring little pat to the hand of the woman on his left.

The woman. Lana Marra's hair had grayed and wrinkles radiated from the corners of her bright blue eyes, but she still moved with a dancer's grace.

On her left, obese Gustave Wenzel sweated mightily, running his sausage fingers through the moist gray ringlets of his hair when he wasn't rubbing his red-streaked eyes.

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The seat at the extreme right was empty.

At 1:10 there was a flurry at the doorway. A giant strode in, breaking free of the grip of Lieutenant Ellsworth who was a step behind him. He was the largest black man Mensing had ever seen. He was gray-bearded, wore a dashiki, and sported a huge *Free Angela* button at the breast.

"You people wanted to see me, I understand?" he boomed. "My name is Mahmoud Naguib. You know me as Tulliver Warde."

Ellsworth and Hough led him to a corner and exchanged furious whispers with him, while the four seated suspects turned and craned their necks to see what was happening. After about five minutes Ellsworth motioned Naguib to the vacant seat in the front row and beckoned Mensing to the corner.

"Same story as the others," Ellsworth reported, "except that he hadn't planned to come to the screening at all till he heard about the murder on TV. He claims he didn't tell anyone else about getting the invitation. Refuses to say where he was Friday night at the time English got strangulated."

"What did he say about the vacant apartment?" Mensing asked.

"He won't say. My guess is he was doing something for the Panthers or one of those groups, heard about English getting killed, knew he'd be questioned, and shut up shop in a hurry. I'm calling the subversives squad right away to keep an eye on him. That boy's doing more than writing kiddie serials nowadays."

Mensing was tempted to comment that he hadn't just been writing a kiddie serial when he wrote *The Thunder Men vs. Satan's Legion* either, then thought better of it. If Ellsworth couldn't see the prophetic and revolutionary aspects of that serial for himself, Mensing wouldn't point them out.

Ellsworth and Hough took seats in the second row and Mensing stepped in front of the small group again, introduced himself again for Naguib's benefit, and explained that he wanted them all to watch the serial very closely and be on the alert for anything that might throw light on the murder of Jon Nordeen. He would have the film stopped at the end of each chapter and poll the audience for ideas.

Then Mensing took his own seat and signaled to the projectionist, who killed the lights, and suddenly the screen blazed with life and noise and action.

End of Chapter One: no comments.

End of Chapter Two: no comments.

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After seven chapters there were several comments, all to the effect that the audience was getting hungry. Hough took their sandwich orders and handed the list to a uniformed man.

At the end of Chapter Eight they broke to eat. Over his roast-beef-on-white Bertrand Harbage asked his wife, in a tone of polite amazement, "Goodness gracious, Lillian, was that woman doing all those acrobatic tricks really you?"—and Lana Marra replied, "No, darling"—pointing to Sarpi—"it was he." Sarpi ate nothing. Mensing got into a discussion with Wenzel on how many of the classics had been converted into agitato music for Westerns and serials during the golden age of the B picture. Mahmoud Naguib, formerly Tulliver Warde, ate alone, standing in a far corner. After half an hour's munching and chatting the lights were killed again and work was resumed. Still no one saw anything helpful.

Late in Chapter Eleven, Mensing spotted the answer. Satan's Legion had captured The Flame, and Colonel Cain had sent a note to Lance King that if he did not ride alone and unarmed into Cain City at sunrise the next morning, the girl would be shot. When a close-up of the note filled the screen, Mensing saw the truth. He sighed, and settled back with detached calm to enjoy the final cliffhanger and the climactic twelfth chapter.

At THE END the overheads glared into life and they all blinked and stirred as though wakened from a long dream. Mensing pushed himself up and stood facing them again. "See anything?" he asked for the twelfth time. Noes and negative headshakes were the answers.

"Well, I did," said Loren Mensing. "I still don't know what Spencer English saw or thought he saw. But I don't need to know. Because I know now who killed English, and therefore who killed Nordeen."

Ellsworth and Hough snapped alert, took up positions at the door as though to block someone's escape route.

"That note delivered to Nordeen in Chapter Eleven," Mensing explained, "returned my mind to the notes that four of you, and I myself, had received from English, inviting us to this screening. Ellsworth, hand me your photocopies of those carbons, will you? . . . Thanks.

"I'll try to do this by the Socratic method. What was English's object in inviting all of us here for the screening? What do you think, Mr. Sarpi?"

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Sarpi cleared his throat. "To get our opinions on what he saw—at least, that's what his letter to me said." The others hummed or nodded agreement.

"Doesn't it follow then that the last person in the world he would want at the screening would be the person he thought was the murderer of Jon Nordeen?"

"Why, yes, it does, doesn't it?" volunteered Bertrand Harbage. "Good point, sir."

"But where does it lead?" Gustave Wenzel growled.

"To the truth. Look—none of you told any person not here that this screening was to take place, and yet somehow the murderer of Jon Nordeen found out, strangled Spencer English, broke in here and made a futile attempt to steal the print of the serial."

"Wait, man." Tulliver Warde held up his enormous hand. "You violate the canons of your own white logic. First you say Spence didn't invite the murderer here, then you say the murderer is here."

Bertrand Harbage, as if suddenly realizing that he alone had not received a letter from English, turned pale.

"No, Mr. Naguib. I can avoid that contradiction if I can show *that one of the apparent recipients of an invitation letter from English was actually not invited by him at all.*" He held up the sheaf of photocopies. "We've established that English himself typed the letters he sent. We've been assuming that he typed *all* the letters in this sheaf. That assumption is demonstrably false. One letter is a fake, one letter was not typed by English.

"Notice the letter addressed to me, for example, and the one addressed to Mr. Wenzel. Look at the spacing at the end of each sentence. How many blank spaces do you see after each period, Mr. Sarpi?"

"One," Sarpi replied.

"Now look at *this* letter. How many spaces after each period?"

"Two."

"Ever hear of a typist who alternated between depressing the space bar once and twice? No, neither have I. By force of habit every typist will do it one way or the other, but will not skip back and forth between one and two spaces. A self-taught typist, as I gather English was, might do it either way, but a trained secretary will skip two spaces.

"The only one of these letters with two spaces between

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sentences is yours, Mrs. Harbage. You were a secretary before your marriage, I understand?"

Lillian Harbage sat bolt upright. "You're accusing *me?*"

"I'm sorry," said Mensing. "Your secretarial training betrayed you. You did *not* receive a letter from Spencer English. The first you heard of his plan for a screening was when Sarpi phoned and told you. You saw at once that you might be in danger, so you lied to Sarpi that you, too, had received an invitation. Then you proceeded to strangle English with picture wire.

"When you broke into this office after the murder to steal the film, you decided to use the typewriter and office stationery to fake a letter that would conceal your lie to Sarpi, support the assumption that you could not be the person English suspected, and plant a hint of English's senility in case his discovery was ever rediscovered. You slipped the copy of the fake letter-invitation into the sheaf of genuine carbons and took the original home with you. But you made the mistake of depressing the space bar once too often between sentences."

Ellsworth, his face beefsteak-red with anger, lunged toward Mensing. "What the hell kind of a gag are you trying to pull? That double-spacing stuff isn't evidence. It's *nothing!* It's blank space. If I made an arrest on that they'd have my badge. What are you trying to do, get me kicked off the force?"

Mensing looked at the lieutenant as he would at a fly that had chosen to light on his dinner. "You interrupted me. I'm not finished." He turned back to Mrs. Harbage. "You also made a second mistake. Take a look at the heading on the letter addressed to you. 'Mrs. Bertrand Harbage, 1471 Center Court, Apartment 2-D.' *The apartment you just moved into.* Since you admit you've had no contact with English for a couple of months, how could he have known that you'd changed apartments in your building?"

"Oh, God," Bertrand Harbage whispered. "Did you say a minute ago that Mr. English was strangled with picture wire?" Mensing nodded. "I hadn't known that," Harbage said. He stared at his wife as if he had never seen her before. "Last night when I was hanging the paintings in our new flat I ran out of wire. And I knew I had bought more than enough just last week—"

"Shut up!" Mrs. Harbage screamed. "Do you want me to be executed? Think of our child!"

Ellsworth stepped forward and faced the pale woman. Her eyes

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were sick with fright. "Mrs. Harbage, I think we've now reached the point where the Supreme Court requires me to let you know what your rights are. I must warn you that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to be represented—"

Suddenly Lana Marra moved. She kicked upward, toppling Ellsworth backward into Mensing. Both men hit the floor. Lana streaked to the windows, tore back the thick drapes, hurled herself through the glass, screaming.

This time there was no last-minute rescue. Her dancer's body slammed into the garbage cans in the alley below with an explosive clatter. Bertrand Harbage collapsed on the screening-room floor. Mensing phoned for an ambulance, then raced down in the elevator with Ellsworth and the others.

She looked like nothing human, but she was not yet dead. Mensing was sick in the alley, then crept close enough to hear her confession to Ellsworth. Nordeen had been going to leave her and take up a Gauguin life with a dusky native girl he had met in the Pacific, and Lana Marra had loved him too much to lose him. She was dead before the ambulance shrieked into the fetid alley.

As the others began to separate and leave, Mensing took Mahmoud Naguib aside for a moment. "Whatever you were doing, cool it for a while. They're going to be watching you and probably bugging you, starting now." The black man said nothing—as though it were raining and Mensing had told him it was raining. Then he nodded, without changing expression, and walked away.

Suddenly Mensing felt directionless and afraid—like a man trying to fight a forest fire he knows is out of control. It was going to be a brutal Monday.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

John F. Dreyer's first story, "It Just Ain't Right," appeared in the July 1971 issue of EQMM. It was a "slice of life" crime story—"uncompromisingly realistic, reflecting the violence of its time." Mr. Dreyer's second story is altogether different (a change of pace that is most encouraging in the work of a new writer)—a straight detective story introducing Lieutenant Bill Donegan—not a "slice of life" in the purely realistic sense, but a slice of police investigation in the purely deductive sense

A MATTER OF VANITY

by JOHN F. DREYER

The body of Gottfried Baumann, wealthy architect and city planner, lay face down across his bed. A doctor and two hospital attendants waited impatiently for Lieutenant Bill Donegan to authorize removal of the body. When the lieutenant shuffled out of the bathroom adjoining the huge and elegant bedroom, he gestured carelessly, and the attendants rolled the corpse over and lifted it onto the stretcher. The lieutenant drifted around the room, looking more like a tourist inspecting a castle than a police officer performing his duty. He ran his hand over the red-velvet chair in the corner and stared curiously at the ornate tapestries.

Near the doorway Mrs. Gottfried Baumann was relating the tragic events of the evening to Patrolman Brown. The new widow was at least 30 years younger than her husband and very beautiful. She was not, however, freshly and pleasantly beautiful, brimming with the glory of youth. Hers was rather a grand and formal beauty, a beauty that feeds on its own awareness, giving off light rather than warmth.

She stared vacantly in the general direction of the bed on which her husband lay and recited her story tonelessly.

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Only when the attendants flung the sheet over her husband's face did her elegance and calmness fail her, only then did her voice catch in her throat.

Brown, meanwhile, was trying to be efficient and courteous. His concentration, however, was distracted not only by the beauty of the widow but also by the actions of the man he was trying to please. Once he had to ask Mrs. Baumann to repeat an answer as he watched the lieutenant take a long cigar from the humidor, slide the cigar back and forth under his nose a couple of times, then put it carefully into his coat pocket. Minutes later Brown stopped in the middle of a question when he heard Donegan click-click the silver cigarette lighter on the night table.

Finally Brown was finished. He called the lieutenant, who was paging through a leather-bound book from the book shelf. Without looking up Donegan answered, "Get the name and address of their lawyer and find out about servants."

As Mrs. Baumann was explaining that the only regular servant was a woman who came in daily to do the housework and laundry, Donegan came over, took Brown's notebook, and read silently. When he had finished, the lieutenant offered Mrs. Baumann his sympathies and told her that someone from the department would be over the next day to get her signature on the statement. He then nudged Brown toward the doorway and they left.

In the police car Donegan said, "I'll drive, Brownie. You got some writing to do."

Brown looked at him curiously. "I got it all," he said. "I'll type it up when I get back to the station."

"Sure, you got it all," Donegan said. "Mr. Baumann went to bed about eleven. Mrs. Baumann stayed up to watch the news on TV and fell asleep. She woke about one thirty, went upstairs, and found her husband dead with an empty bottle of sleeping pills and a suicide note on the night table. You got all that, but you didn't get anything important."

Brown looked puzzled. "Like what?"

Donegan started the motor and pulled away. "Start writing," he said. "First of all, the guy had gotten himself ready for bed: he'd taken a shower, brushed his teeth, put on his pajamas, and turned back the covers on the bed. Second, he'd definitely planned on getting up: his clothes were laid out and the alarm was set for seven thirty. Third, there was no

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other writing paper in the room except the piece the suicide note was on. Fourth, the note was written with a ballpoint, and the only pen I saw was an old-fashioned fountain pen in the suit coat that was laid out. That's important, Brownie, because people who use fountain pens don't use ballpoints unless they have to.

"And last, there's this crazy note." He handed Brown a small sheet of paper. "Here. Read it aloud and have some copies made when you get back to the station. Make sure I get one, and keep one for yourself."

Brown took the paper and hined his light on it. " 'There omes a time,' " he read, 'when even the gifted have ad enough of this life. My time ; now, and I'm leaving quietly. ly wife I thank for the gifts ie has given me in my last ays. Pride is for the younger, id so I leave with no regrets. . Baumann.' "

Brown shook his head. "It akes sense, and yet it doesn't ake sense. What's it mean?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going ome now and get some sleep. ave them check out the ndwriting to see if it's really umann's. And don't forget e copies."

Several minutes later Donen pulled into his driveway. As he got out of the car he said, "See you tomorrow."

Brown slid into the driver's seat. "Tomorrow's my day off."

"Take an extra one next week instead. I want you with me tomorrow—today, I mean. It's three thirty now. I'll meet you about ten."

Before Brown could answer, Donegan was unlocking his front door.

At ten o'clock Lieutenant Donegan met Captain Al Henry and explained what he had seen at the home of Gottfried Baumann. Al shook his head. "Bill, there's only one thing wrong. The handwriting is definitely Baumann's—no question about that. And people don't write suicide notes just for the fun of it. I admit that all the other things are valid bits of evidence, but how do you explain the note? What does it mean?"

"I *can't* explain it, Al, but I can't ignore it either. I asked Brown to have some copies made. Do you have them?"

Al handed him two copies. "I got a call from Mrs. Baumann's lawyer. They want the matter cleared up fast so they can get the estate settled."

"They're in a hurry, aren't they?"

"There's a lot of money

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involved."

"How much?"

"A million, maybe more."

Donegan whistled softly through his teeth. "People," he said, "have been killed for less."

Donegan found Brown dozing comfortably in the police car. "Okay," he said. "Let's get going."

Brown rubbed his eyes. "Yes, sir. Where to?"

"First of all, knock off the 'sir.' Then take me to that new professional building on Bligh Street. Here's your copy of the note. Get going. I'll read it to you this time." Brown started the engine and pulled away. "'There comes a time when even the gifted have had enough of this life. My time is now, and I'm leaving quietly. My wife I thank for the gifts she has given me in my last days. Pride is for the younger, and so I leave with no regrets. G. Baumann.'"

Brown looked at Donegan and shrugged. The lieutenant took a deep breath and slowly folded the paper. He sat silent for a minute and then said suddenly, "Brownie, there's something in that note and we're going to find it. Hurry up."

They checked the sign in the lobby. The firm of Stolz & Stolz had a suite of offices on the third floor. In the elevator Donegan warned Brown, "Don't say anything. Just listen."

"Yes, sir."

"Bill."

"Okay, Bill."

As they entered, the young secretary looked up from her typing. Donegan asked, "Is Mr Stolz in?"

"Junior or Senior?"

"I guess it makes no difference."

"Well, Mr. Stolz, Senio won't be in today. Mr. Stolz Junior can see you in a few minutes. Will you please have seat?"

They sat down. Donega reached in his pocket and dre out the suicide note. Brow picked up a copy of *Life* ar peered over it at the secretar

Ten minutes later a do opened and Mr. Stolz, Juni walked toward them. I extended his hand and sa warmly, "Gottfried Stolz. Ca help you?"

Donegan tucked the note his pocket. "I hope so. I ju want some information on M Baumann. I guess this is t place to start."

Stolz led them into office. "I can begin by tell you he was my father's b friend. In fact, that's why father's not here today. He much too shaken to come

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work this morning. He and Mr. Baumann came to the United States together right after the war. They had served in the army together and became very close. As soon as they got a chance to leave Germany they did."

"How well did you know Mr. Baumann?"

"Well, let's put it this way," he said, leaning back in his chair. "He and my father were like brothers. That means I considered him my uncle. In fact, I'm named after him."

Donegan lit a cigarette. "What kind of work did they do during the war?"

"They were in some kind of intelligence unit. They didn't talk about it much. Like most Germans, they wanted to forget."

The lieutenant flicked ashes nto the ashtray. "What about Mrs. Baumann?"

"What about her?"

"What's she like?"

"Very nice, I guess." Gottfried Stolz fiddled with a paper clip. "I don't know her that well. What does she have to do with it?"

"I don't know," Donegan said, "but we have to investigate these things, you know. How long were they married?"

Stolz flipped the paper clip onto his desk. "About a year. His first wife died five years ago. She was my godmother. Their only child was killed in a bombing raid. She didn't want to come to America at first, but eventually she grew to like it."

Donegan rose suddenly. "When can I talk to your father?"

Gottfried Stolz hesitated. "Don't bother him for a while, please."

"I'm sorry," Donegan said, "but I have to get this matter cleared up as soon as possible. Tomorrow?"

"Can't you wait till Wednesday, till right after the funeral?"

Donegan nodded. "I guess that'll be okay. Thanks for your help."

They left the office, took the elevator to the ground floor, and walked silently to the car. Only after they had gone a few blocks did Donegan speak. "Well, what do you think?"

Brown shrugged. "Seems like a wasted morning to me."

"Why?"

"Just like you said about Mrs. Baumann," Brown replied. "He didn't say anything important."

Donegan smiled. "Not bad, Brownie," he said. "But sometimes what a person *doesn't* say is more important than what he *does* say."

"Is that why you didn't ask more questions?"

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"Yup."

Brown looked puzzled. "Can you tell me what you learned by *not* asking questions?"

"Only that Mr. Stolz, Junior didn't want to talk about the present Mrs. Baumann. Maybe that's nothing. Maybe. Let's go see Mr. Stolz, Senior."

"But you said you'd wait till after the funeral."

Donegan took the note from his pocket. "There's an old saying, 'Strike while the iron is hot.' I'm not sure what that means exactly, but it seems to fit here." He unfolded the paper. "Let me read this crazy thing again. See if it makes any sense yet. 'There comes a time when even the gifted have had enough of this life. My time is now, and I'm leaving quietly. My wife I thank for the gifts she has given me in my last days. Pride is for the younger, and so I leave with no regrets. G. Baumann.' "

"Just like before, Bill, still nothing."

The home of Herr Stolz was located in a housing development not far from the city. Although American in design and construction, the white lace curtains and the window boxes overflowing with red and white petunias were unmistakably German. When Herr Stolz answered the door, Donegan introduced himself and explained that he'd like to close the case quickly and would Herr Stolz, as both the lawyer and friend of Gottfried Baumann, answer some questions.

Herr Stolz nodded sadly and said with a slight German accent, "He was my friend. If he needs me, I will help him."

Donegan thanked him. "We talked to your son this morning. He told us about your friendship with Mr. Baumann. You served in the German army together?"

The old man smiled faintly. "Please don't hold that against us. We were very young."

"That war's been over for twenty-five years," Donegan replied. "Besides, you're an American now. By the way what kind of outfit were you in?"

"We were in intelligence Cryptography. We worked with codes, both yours and ours."

"Tell me about Mr. Baumann. Was he a vain man? I mean, was he proud of his success?"

Herr Stolz shook his head. "Those of us who lived in Germany thirty years ago know how dangerous vanity can be. We saw what can happen when someone takes himself too seriously. Herr Baumann considered himself fortunate to be able to start a new life in the

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great country. He was talented and confident, yes, but not vain."

"Did he think of himself as gifted?" Donegan asked.

Herr Stolz looked surprised. "He knew his abilities, of course, but he knew also that they were lent to him by God. He'd never call himself gifted."

"Tell me about his wife," Donegan said.

The old man took a deep breath. "Well," he began slowly, "I guess every man is allowed one infatuation. I don't know what else to say about her. They've only been married about a year."

"How did they meet?"

"Actually it was my son who introduced them. He knew her from college."

Donegan drew the note from his pocket and handed it to Stolz. The old man read it silently and gave it back.

"Is that your friend's handwriting?" Donegan asked as he folded the note.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it." The old man's voice quivered as he spoke.

"A little strange-sounding, isn't it?"

"I guess I didn't know my old friend as well as I thought." Stolz stood up. "Lieutenant, may we continue this interview at some other time? I don't know what else I can tell you, and I have some work to do at my office."

As they walked to the car Brown asked, "No offense, Bill, but why didn't you question him a little more? Why didn't you follow up that business about his son and Mrs. Baumann? You still think you can learn things without asking questions?"

Donegan answered slowly. "Brownie, I'm convinced that everything we need to know is in that note."

"You mean like a code?" Brown shook his head. "C'mon, Bill, do you really think that somebody about to be murdered would have the time to think up a code? It's just not reasonable."

"I don't know the answer, but reasonable or not it's the only explanation I can think of."

He pulled the note from his pocket and stared at it, chewing his bottom lip. Suddenly he began to nod. "Brownie," he said, "drop me off at a bookstore. You go back to the station and see if you can dig up anything on Mrs. Baumann. Pick me up at the diner in half an hour."

Twenty minutes later Bill was standing in front of the diner. He had just lit another

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cigarette and was puffing on it nervously. With almost every puff he would walk to the curb and look up the street for Brown. Just as he flipped away the half-finished cigarette the patrol car stopped in front of him. He got in quickly. "Where've you been? I said half an hour."

Brown looked at his watch. "What do you mean? I'm five minutes early."

Bill slammed the door. "I hope that's not too late. Hurry over to Stolz's office."

Brown pulled away. "What did you find?"

"A murderer. I'll tell you all about it later."

Brown wheeled into the parking lot and they jumped from the car. They ran up the stairs to the third floor and rushed into the office of Stolz & Stolz. The receptionist was gone, but the intercom clicked on, and the voice of Herr Stolz told them, "Come in, gentlemen. I've been expecting you."

Inside they found the old man seated at his desk with a gun pointed at his son, who sat with his head in his hands in a chair against the wall. Herr Stolz laid the gun down and slid it across the desk. "Lieutenant," he said softly, "if you still want to know about vanity, my son can give you some details on the subject. He can tell you about a young woman so vain she thought she could make her husband swallow a handful of sleeping pills and then write his own suicide note. He can also tell you about the young man who held a gun to the husband's head to make sure he did what he was told. He, also, is vain, so vain that he refused to learn his father's language because he didn't want to be considered a foreigner."

As Gottfried Stolz sat silently, Donegan informed him of his rights. When he told him he had the right to be represented by counsel, Donegan glanced at Herr Stolz. The old man turned away.

Finally Donegan and Brown helped the son to his feet and led him toward the door. As they were leaving, Herr Stolz said quietly, "Don't forget the girl, Lieutenant."

Donegan nodded, "Don' worry, sir. We'll send someone for her right away."

The old man looked once at his son, opened his mouth to speak, then turned and walked toward the window. Brown and the lieutenant left with their prisoner.

An hour later they walked down the hall to the cafeteria. "Well, Bill," Brown said impatiently, "are you or are yo

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not going to tell me how you knew?"

"It'll cost you a coffee."

Brown nodded, "Cheap enough."

They got their coffee and sat down at a small table. Donegan reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a German-English dictionary. "Do you know any German?" he asked.

Brown looked puzzled. "Some from high school. Do you?"

"I spent some time in Germany right after the war, but I don't think I know any more than you," Donegan said. He handed him the dictionary. "What's the German word for *finger*?"

"That's easy," Brown said. "I don't have to look that one up. It's *der Finger*."

"Good," Donegan said. "Now what's the German word for *arm*?"

Brown frowned impatiently. "*Der Arm*, of course. C'mon, Bill. I wasn't *that* bad."

Donegan leaned back in his chair. "Okay, try one more. What's the word for *gift*?"

Brown shrugged. "*Gift*, I guess. It seems to me that there's a German word, *das Gift* or *der Gift*."

"There is," Donegan said and nodded toward the dictionary. "Look it up."

Brown flipped the pages. "Here it is," he said. "*Das Gift*. It means—poison!"

"Right," Bill said. "Now check the suicide note." He handed him the paper.

" 'Even the gifted,' " Brown read. "He called himself gifted—poisoned. 'The gifts she has given me'—she poisoned him!" Brown stopped suddenly. "Wait a minute. That takes care of Mrs. Baumann. How did you know about Stolz, Junior?"

"Check the note again," Donegan said. "Do you see any other word that sounds a little strange?"

Brown read silently. "Well, this word *pride* doesn't really seem to fit." He picked up the dictionary and paged through it. "Well, I'll be—" he mumbled. "*Pride — der Stolz.*" He looked at the note. " 'Pride is for the younger.'—Stolz, Junior, of course. It seems so obvious."

"So obvious," Donegan said, "that a former cryptographer like Herr Stolz saw it right away. He headed for his office as soon as we left. It's a good thing he did. I don't think we'd have been able to build a case on the note alone."

They got up and walked to the door. Brown handed Donegan the dictionary. "Just think what you could do with a whole set of encyclopedias, Bill. You'd outdo Sherlock Holmes."

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a *NEW* short-short by

ELAINE SLATER

"As for Joey's wife, it was nag, nag, nag all the time"... a sparkling gem of a short-short...

HARD LUCK JOEY

by ELAINE SLATER

Joey liked to think of himself as a businessman—a sort of Wall Street broker or something of the sort. Of course, he didn't exactly work on Wall Street; he was a packer at the Skye Grade Meat Packing Company, but he was the local bookie's agent and he collected the illegal bets of all the guys in the plant. When their bets paid off, he felt like a maker of millionaires, a customer's man at Shmerril, Lobe & Ralston, giving inside tips on the market. When the bets didn't pay off—as usually they didn't—well, he would tell the guys that was the luck of the game. That was the way capitalism worked: you risked your money and you win or you lose. Simple as that.

But lately things had been going badly for Joey. It was as if the market went down a few points every day. Not that the guys weren't betting—they were, more than ever. But he was having terrible problems in his personal life and he couldn't seem to get himself out of the box. When he was a kid, everyone—even his Ma—had called him Hard Luck Joey. For a while he thought he'd escaped that moniker, but now it was back with him again.

It all started when Carol came into the Skye Grade as a file clerk. She was pert and pretty and all the guys eyed her even though the word was out she was married. That didn't seem to bother her and it sure didn't bother Joey, not with his fish of a wife, and soon he and Carol were spending more and more time together. It turned out she hated her husband but he was nuts about her and the

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real jealous type, so they had to be very careful. As for Joey's wife, it was nag, nag, nag all the time, so he could kill her. I mean, *really* kill her.

Well, the seed was there and as far as Joey was concerned it was his wife's fault, not his. So when he heard from the bookie who listened to his tale of woe about a "contract" guy who could arrange an accident for his wife, something like a shotgun blast in the head, Joey didn't hesitate too long. He didn't fill the triggerman in about Carol, only about his fish of a dumb-broad wife, and owing to his friendship with the bookie, Joey got a cut rate.

True, when he met the contract man Joey almost backed out, but he was afraid to look chicken. That man was as cold as steel and twice as hard, with hooded eyes, and mean, I mean *mean!*

It was all arranged for Wednesday when his wife would get back from her job about 5:00, arriving on foot at their crumby house—she was a sloppy housekeeper and he couldn't stand gardening or repairs. The gunman wouldn't have to get too close. He could wait across the street behind a bunch of bushes in the weed-strewn, garbage-laden empty lot, shoot, and beat it. Joey was planning to get home a little late that night, stopping for a few beers on the way home as he used to do before he met Carol.

But then when everything was arranged so beautifully, it began to be Hard Luck Joey all over again.

Get this. On Wednesday morning—*Wednesday*—his wife plops into the kitchen where he's grabbing off a cup of coffee and she's got a suitcase in her hands.

"Joey," she says, "I don't know how you're gonna take this, but me and Eddie—well, we gotta do our thing. So long, Joey."

So long, Joey. Before he could open his mouth to say, "But you can't—I've arranged everything for tonight," she was gone and he was left gaping.

That was bad, right? Real unlucky, right? But listen to this. It turned out his bookie was out of town and of course Joey didn't know the contract man's name or where to reach him, so he couldn't head him off. Joey felt sick to his stomach. He was in over his head. He decided not to go to work that day, to call in sick. Joey, the big Wall Street broker, had run into a drop in the market and didn't know how to handle it.

He hung around the house all day in his undershorts,

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drinking beer and switching stations on the TV. He figured around 5:00 or so he'd go out and call off the action in the dirty lot across the street.

At 5:00 he switched off the soap opera he'd been watching and went into the bedroom to step into his trousers.

Just as he was putting the first leg in, the whole house was shaken by a blast of gunfire.

My God, he thought dumbly, the fish musta changed her mind and come home just when she coulda saved me some bucks by running off with Eddie!

Joey got into his trousers and ran outside prepared to look plenty shocked for the neighbors. He did a good job, too, only he wasn't acting. It was Carol who was lying dead on his doorstep. Neighbors said she had come running up the street as if she were frightened out of her skin. And now she was lying dead and not a bush stirred across the street.

Hard Luck Joey became the center of attention on his block. No one knew of his affair with Carol. He had called in sick and they all thought, since she and Joey worked in the same place, she was coming to tell him the boss was sore or something like that. The police didn't suspect a thing and Joey told them his wife had just gone away on a visit—uh—to her mother and her sister who lived in a trailer camp somewhere down in Florida. He expected her back, he said, any day.

And then, the very next day the fish did come back, suitcase and all. She'd read about the awful gunning and felt bad for Joey, she said. He sure musta got scared, and gee, he'd stayed home sick all day—she'd read about it in the papers. She'd no idea he cared like that about her. So she told Eddie goodbye "I belong with my Joey."

So here he was, Joey brooded as he stared out the window at the lot across the street, right back where he started, only his chick was dead and he was stuck for the rest of his life with the dumb fish he'd married.

He was Hard Luck Joey, all right.

But Joey didn't realize just *how* Hard Luck he was. As he walked down the street to find solace in a few beers, he saw the bushes move over there in the windless night. In another moment he would know why Carol had been so afraid of her husband.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 371st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a haunting story, the kind of story that the late Anthony Boucher would have called "lovely," except that you had to hear him pronounce the word to realize its full meaning . . .

The author, Joyce Harrington, admits her "age is no terrific secret, but let's just say I've been around a while." At the time we accepted "The Purple Shroud" she had been married for twelve years to former "Look" photographer, Phil Harrington. The Harringtons have two sons, Christopher and Evan. Mrs. Harrington has "worked at many jobs in many places"—from a doorknob factory to the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. She doesn't have any hobbies as such—rather, she does the things that interest her—she climbs mountains, paints pictures, weaves on a loom in her attic. "As you can imagine," she wrote, "I sometimes meet myself coming and going."

And we'll meet her coming and going. Joyce Harrington is a new and impressive talent and we expect—yes, we expect—great things from her . . .

THE PURPLE SHROUD

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

Mrs. Moon threw the shuttle back and forth and pumped the treadles of the big four-harness loom as if her life depended on it. When they asked what she was weaving so furiously, she would laugh silently and say it was a shroud.

"No, really, what is it?"

"My house needs new draperies." Mrs. Moon would smile and the shuttle would fly and the beater would thump the newly woven threads tightly into place. The muffled, steady sounds of her craft could be heard from early morning until very late at night, until the

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sounds became an accepted and expected background noise and were only noticed in their absence.

Then they would say, "I wonder what Mrs. Moon is doing now."

That summer, as soon as they had arrived at the art colony and even before they had unpacked, Mrs. Moon requested that the largest loom in the weaving studio be installed in their cabin. Her request had been granted because she was a serious weaver, and because her husband, George, was one of the best painting instructors they'd ever had. He could coax the amateurs into stretching their imaginations and trying new ideas and techniques, and he would bully the scholarship students until, in a fury, they would sometimes produce works of surprising originality.

George Moon was, himself, only a competent painter. His work had never caught on, although he had a small loyal following in Detroit and occasionally sold a painting. His only concessions to the need for making a living and for buying paints and brushes was to teach some ten hours a week throughout the winter and to take this summer job at the art colony, which was also their vacation. Mrs. Moon taught craft therapy at a home for the aged.

After the loom had been set up in their cabin Mrs. Moon waited. Sometimes she went swimming in the lake, sometimes she drove into town and poked about in the antique shops, and sometimes she just sat in the wicker chair and looked at the loom.

They said, "What are you waiting for, Mrs. Moon? When are you going to begin?"

One day Mrs. Moon drove into town and came back with two boxes full of brightly colored yarns. Classes had been going on for about two weeks, and George was deeply engaged with his students. One of the things the students loved about George was the extra time he gave them. He was always ready to sit for hours on the porch of the big house, just outside the communal dining room, or under a tree, and talk about painting or about life as a painter or tell stories about painters he had known.

George looked like a painter. He was tall and thin, and with approaching middle age he was beginning to stoop a little. He had black snaky hair which he had always worn on the long side, and which was beginning to turn gray. His eyes were very dark, so dark you couldn't se

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the pupils, and they regarded everything and everyone with a probing intensity that evoked uneasiness in some and caused young girls to fall in love with him.

Every year George Moon selected one young lady disciple to be his summer consort.

Mrs. Moon knew all about these summer alliances. Every year, when they returned to Detroit, George would confess to her with great humility and swear never to repeat his transgression.

"Never again, Arlene," he would say. "I promise you, never again."

Mrs. Moon would smile her forgiveness.

Mrs. Moon hummed as she sorted through the skeins of purple and deep scarlet, goldenrod yellow and rich royal blue. She hummed as she wound the glowing hanks into fat balls, and she thought about George and the look that had passed between him and the girl from Minneapolis at dinner the night before. George had not returned to their cabin until almost two in the morning. The girl from Minneapolis was short and plump, with a round face and a halo of fuzzy red-gold hair. She reminded Mrs. Moon of a Teddy bear; she reminded Mrs. Moon of herself twenty years before.

When Mrs. Moon was ready to begin, she carried the purple yarn to the weaving studio.

"I have to make a very long warp," she said. "I'll need to use the warping reel."

She hummed as she measured out the seven feet and a little over, then sent the reel spinning.

"Is it wool?" asked the weaving instructor.

"No, it's orlon," said Mrs. Moon. "It won't shrink, you know."

Mrs. Moon loved the creak of the reel, and she loved feeling the warp threads grow fatter under her hands until at last each planned thread was in place and she could tie the bundle and braid up the end. When she held the plaited warp in her hands she imagined it to be the shorn tresses of some enormously powerful earth goddess whose potency was now transferred to her own person.

That evening after dinner, Mrs. Moon began to thread the loom. George had taken the rowboat and the girl from Minneapolis to the other end of the lake where there was a deserted cottage. Mrs. Moon knew he kept a sleeping bag there, and a cache of wine and peanuts. Mrs. Moon hummed as she carefully threaded the eye of each heddle with a single

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purple thread, and thought of black widow spiders and rattlesnakes coiled in the corners of the dark cottage.

She worked contentedly until midnight and then went to bed. She was asleep and smiling when George stumbled in two hours later and fell into bed with his clothes on.

Mrs. Moon wove steadily through the summer days. She did not attend the weekly critique sessions for she had nothing to show and was not interested in the problems others were having with their work. She ignored the Saturday night parties where George and the girl from Minneapolis and the others danced and drank beer and slipped off to the beach or the boathouse. Sometimes, when she tired of the long hours at the loom, she would go for solitary walks in the woods and always brought back curious trophies of her rambling. The small cabin, already crowded with the loom and the iron double bedstead, began to fill up with giant toadstools, interesting bits of wood, arrangements of reeds and wild wheat.

One day she brought back two large black stones on which she painted faces. The eyes of the faces were closed and the mouths were faintly curved in archaic smiles. She placed one stone on each side of the fireplace.

George hated the stones. "Those damn stonefaces are watching me," he said. "Get them out of here."

"How can they be watching you? Their eyes are closed."

Mrs. Moon left the stones beside the fireplace and George soon forgot to hate them. She called them Apollo I and Apollo II.

The weaving grew and Mrs. Moon thought it the best thing she had ever done. Scattered about the purple ground were signs and symbols which she saw against the deep blackness of her closed eyelids when she thought of passion and revenge, of love and wasted years and the child she had never had. She thought the barbaric colors spoke of these matters, and she was pleased.

"I hope you'll finish it before the final critique," the weaving teacher said when she came to the cabin to see it. "It's very good."

Word spread through the camp and many of the students came to the cabin to see the marvelous weaving. Mrs. Moon was proud to show it to them and received their compliments with quiet grace.

"It's too fine to hang at a window," said one practical Sunday-painting matron. "The

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sun will fade the colors."

"I'd love to wear it," said the life model.

"You!" said a bearded student of lithography, "It's a robe for a pagan king!"

"Perhaps you're right," said Mrs. Moon, and smiled her happiness on all of them.

The season was drawing to a close when in the third week of August, Mrs. Moon threw the shuttle for the last time. She slumped on the backless bench and rested her limp hands on the breast beam of the loom. Tomorrow she would cut the warp.

That night, while George was showing color slides of his paintings in the main gallery, the girl from Minneapolis came alone to the Moons' cabin. Mrs. Moon was lying on the bed watching a spider spin a web in the rafters. A fire was blazing in the fireplace, between Apollo I and Apollo II, for the late summer night was chill.

"You must let him go," said the golden-haired Teddy bear. "He loves me."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Moon.

"You don't seem to understand. I'm talking about George." The girl sat on the bed. "I think I'm pregnant."

"That's nice," said Mrs. Moon. "Children are a blessing. Watch the spider."

"We have a real relationship going. I don't care about being married—that's too feudal. But you must free George to come and be a father image to the child."

"You'll get over it," said Mrs. Moon, smiling a trifle sadly at the girl.

"Oh, you don't even want to know what's happening!" cried the girl. "No wonder George is bored with you."

"Some spiders eat their mates after fertilization," Mrs. Moon remarked. "Female spiders."

The girl flounced angrily from the cabin, as far as one could be said to flounce in blue jeans and sweatshirt.

George performed his end-of-summer separation ritual simply and brutally the following afternoon. He disappeared after lunch. No one knew where he had gone. The girl from Minneapolis roamed the camp, trying not to let anyone know she was searching for him. Finally she rowed herself down to the other end of the lake, to find that George had dumped her transistor radio, her books of poetry, and her box of incense on the damp sand, and had put a padlock on the door of the cottage.

She threw her belongings into the boat and rowed back

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to the camp, tears of rage streaming down her cheeks. She beached the boat, and with head lowered and shoulders hunched she stormed the Moons' cabin. She found Mrs. Moon tying off the severed warp threads.

"Tell George," she shouted, "tell George I'm going back to Minneapolis. He knows where to find me!"

"Here, dear," said Mrs. Moon, "hold the end and walk backwards while I unwind it."

The girl did as she was told, caught by the vibrant colors and Mrs. Moon's concentration. In a few minutes the full length of cloth rested in the girl's arms.

"Put it on the bed and spread it out," said Mrs. Moon. "Let's take a good look at it."

"I'm really leaving," whispered the girl. "Tell him I don't care if I never see him again."

"I'll tell him." The wide strip of purple flowed garishly down the middle of the bed between them. "Do you think he'll like it?" asked Mrs. Moon. "He's going to have it around for a long time."

"The colors are very beautiful, very savage." The girl looked closely at Mrs. Moon. "I wouldn't have thought you would choose such colors."

"I never did before."

"I'm leaving now."

"Goodbye," said Mrs. Moon.

George did not reappear until long after the girl had loaded up her battered bug of a car and driven off. Mrs. Moon knew he had been watching and waiting from the hill behind the camp. He came into the cabin whistling softly and began to take his clothes off.

"God, I'm tired," he said.

"It's almost dinner time."

"Too tired to eat," he yawned. "What's that on the bed?"

"My weaving is finished. Do you like it?"

"It's good. Take it off the bed. I'll look at it tomorrow."

Mrs. Moon carefully folded the cloth and laid it on the weaving bench. She looked at George's thin naked body before he got into bed, and smiled.

"I'm going to dinner now," she said.

"Okay. Don't wake me up when you get back. I could sleep for a week."

"I won't wake you up," said Mrs. Moon.

Mrs. Moon ate dinner at a table by herself. Most of the students had already left. A few people, the Moons among them, usually stayed on after the end of classes to rest and enjoy the isolation. Mrs. Moon spoke to no one.

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After dinner she sat on the pier and watched the sunset. She watched the turtles in the shallow water and thought she saw a blue heron on the other side of the lake. When the sky was black and the stars were too many to count, Mrs. Moon went to the toolshed and got a wheelbarrow. She rolled this to the door of her cabin and went inside.

The cabin was dark and she could hear George's steady heavy breathing. She lit two candles and placed them on the mantelshelf. She spread her beautiful weaving on her side of the bed, gently so as not to disturb the sleeper. Then she quietly moved the weaving bench to George's side of the bed, near his head.

She sat on the bench for a time, memorizing the lines of his face by the wavering candlelight. She touched him softly on the forehead with the pads of her fingertips and gently caressed his eyes, his hard cheeks, his raspy chin. His breathing became uneven and she withdrew her hands, sitting motionless until his sleep rhythm was restored.

Then Mrs. Moon took off her shoes. She walked carefully to the fireplace, taking long quiet steps. She placed her shoes neatly side by side on the hearth and picked up the larger stone, Apollo I. The face of the kouros, the ancient god, smiled up at her and she returned that faint implacable smile. She carried the stone back to the bench beside the bed, and set it down.

Then she climbed onto the bench, and when she stood, she found she could amost touch the spider's web in the rafters. The spider crouched in the heart of its web, and Mrs. Moon wondered if spiders ever slept.

Mrs. Moon picked up Apollo I, and with both arms raised, took careful aim. Her shadow, cast by candlelight, had the appearance of a priestess offering sacrifice. The stone was heavy and her arms grew weak. Her hands let go. The stone dropped.

George's eyes flapped open and he saw Mrs. Moon smiling tenderly down on him. His lips drew back to scream, but his mouth could only form a soundless hole.

"Sleep, George," she whispered, and his eyelids clamped over his unbelieving eyes.

Mrs. Moon jumped off the bench. With gentle fingers she probed beneath his snaky locks until she found a satisfying softness. There was no blood and for this Mrs. Moon was grateful. It would have been a shame to spoil the beauty of her patterns with superfluous

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colors and untidy stains. Her mothlike fingers on his wrist warned her of a faint uneven fluttering.

She padded back to the fireplace and weighed in her hands the smaller, lighter Apollo II. This time she felt there was no need for added height. With three quick butter-churning motions she enlarged the softened area in George's skull and stilled the annoying flutter in his wrist.

Then she rolled him over, as a hospital nurse will roll an immobile patient during bed-making routine, until he rested on his back on one-half of the purple fabric. She placed his arms across his naked chest and straightened his spindly legs. She kissed his closed eyelids, gently stroked his shaggy brows, and said, "Rest now, dear George."

She folded the free half of the royal cloth over him, covering him from head to foot with a little left over at each end. From her sewing box she took a wide-eyed needle and threaded it with some difficulty in the flickering light. Then kneeling beside the bed, Mrs. Moon began stitching across the top. She stitched small careful stitches that would hold for eternity.

Soon the top was closed and she began stitching down the long side. The job was wearisome, but Mrs. Moon was patient and she hummed a sweet, monotonous tune as stitch followed stitch past George's ear, his shoulder, his bent elbow. It was not until she reached his ankles that she allowed herself to stand and stretch her aching knees and flex her cramped fingers.

Retrieving the twin Apollos from where they lay abandoned on George's pillow, she tucked them reverently into the bottom of the cloth sarcophagus and knelt once more to her task. Her needle flew faster as the remaining gap between the two edges of cloth grew smaller, until the last stitch was securely knotted and George was sealed into his funerary garment. But the hardest part of her night's work was yet to come.

She knew she could not carry George even the short distance to the door of the cabin and the wheelbarrow outside. And the wheelbarrow was too wide to bring inside. She couldn't bear the thought of dragging him across the floor and soiling or tearing the fabric she had so lovingly woven. Finally she rolled him onto the weaving bench and despite the fact that it only supported him from armpits to groin, she managed to maneuver it to the door. From there it was

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possible to shift the burden to the waiting wheelbarrow.

Mrs. Moon was now breathing heavily from her exertions, and paused for a moment to survey the night and the prospect before her. There were no lights anywhere in the camp except for the feeble glow of her own guttering candles. As she went to blow them out she glanced at her watch and was mildly surprised to see that it was ten minutes past three. The hours had flown while she had been absorbed in her needlework.

She perceived now the furtive night noises of the forest creatures which had hitherto been blocked from her senses by the total concentration she had bestowed on her work. She thought of weasels and foxes prowling, of owls going about their predatory night activities, and considered herself in congenial company. Then taking up the handles of the wheelbarrow, she trundled down the well-defined path to the boathouse.

The wheelbarrow made more noise than she had anticipated and she hoped she was far enough from any occupied cabin for its rumbling to go unnoticed. The moonless night sheltered her from any wakeful watcher, and a dozen summers of waiting had taught her the nature and substance of every square foot of the camp's area. She could walk it blindfolded.

When she reached the boathouse she found that some hurried careless soul had left a boat on the beach in defiance of the camp's rules. It was a simple matter of leverage to shift her burden from barrow to boat and in minutes Mrs. Moon was heaving inexpertly at the oars. At first the boat seemed inclined to travel only in wide arcs and head back to shore, but with patient determination Mrs. Moon established a rowing rhythm that would take her and her passenger to the deepest part of the lake.

She hummed a sea chanty which aided her rowing and pleased her sense of the appropriate. Then pinpointing her position by the silhouette of the tall solitary pine that grew on the opposite shore, Mrs. Moon carefully raised the oars and rested them in the boat.

As Mrs. Moon crept forward in the boat, feeling her way in the darkness, the boat began to rock gently. It was a pleasant, soothing motion and Mrs. Moon thought of cradles and soft enveloping comforters. She continued creeping slowly forward, swaying with the motion of the boat, until she reached the side of her swaddled

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passenger. There she sat and stroked the cloth and wished that she could see the fine colors just one last time.

She felt the shape beneath the cloth, solid but thin and now rather pitiful. She took the head in her arms and held it against her breast, rocking and humming a long-forgotten lullaby.

The doubled weight at the forward end of the small boat caused the prow to dip. Water began to slosh into the boat—in small wavelets at first as the boat rocked from side to side, then in a steady trickle as the boat rode lower and lower in the water. Mrs. Moon rocked and hummed; the water rose over her bare feet and lapped against her ankles. The sky began to turn purple and she could just make out the distant shape of the boathouse and the hill behind the camp. She was very tired and very cold.

Gently she placed George's head in the water. The boat tilted crazily and she scrambled backward to equalize the weight. She picked up the other end of the long purple chrysalis, the end containing the stone Apollos, and heaved it overboard. George in his shroud, with head and feet trailing in the lake, now lay along the side of the boat weighting it down.

Water was now pouring in. Mrs. Moon held to the other side of the boat with placid hands and thought of the dense comfort of the muddy lake bottom and George beside her forever. She saw that her feet were frantically pushing against the burden of her life, running away from that companionable grave.

With a regretful sigh she let herself slide down the short incline of the seat and came to rest beside George. The boat lurched deeper into the lake. Water surrounded George and climbed into Mrs. Moon's lap. Mrs. Moon closed her eyes and hummed, "Nearer My God to Thee." She did not see George drift away from the side of the boat, carried off by the moving arms of water. She felt a wild bouncing, a shuddering and splashing, and was sure the boat had overturned. With relief she gave herself up to chaos and did not try to hold her breath.

Expecting a suffocating weight of water in her lungs, Mrs. Moon was disappointed to find she could open her eyes, that air still entered and left her gasping mouth. She lay in a pool of water in the bottom of the boat and saw a bird circle high above the lake, peering down at her. The boat was bobbing gently on the water, and when Mrs. Moon sat up she saw that a few yards away,

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through the fresh blue morning, George was bobbing gently too. The purple shroud had filled with air and floated on the water like a small submarine come up for air and a look at the new day.

As she watched, shivering and wet, the submarine shape drifted away and dwindled as the lake took slow possession. At last, with a grateful sigh, green water replacing the last bubble air, it sank just as the bright arc of the sun rose over the hill in time to give Mrs. Moon a final glimpse of glorious purple and gold. She shook herself like a tired old gray dog and called out, "Goodbye, George." Her cry echoed back and forth across the morning and startled forth a chorus of bird shrieks. Pandemonium and farewell. She picked up the oars.

Back on the beach, the boat carefully restored to its place, Mrs. Moon dipped her blistered hands into the lake. She scented bacon on the early air and instantly felt the pangs of an enormous hunger. Mitch, the cook, would be having his early breakfast and perhaps would share it with her. She hurried to the cabin to change out of her wet clothes, and was amazed, as she stepped over the doorsill, at the stark emptiness which greeted her.

Shafts of daylight fell on the rumpled bed, but there was nothing for her there. She was not tired now, did not need to sleep. The fireplace contained cold ashes, and the hearth looked bare and unfriendly. The loom gaped at her like a toothless mouth, its usefulness at an end. In a heap on the floor lay George's clothes where he had dropped them the night before. Out of habit she picked them up, and as she hung them on a hook in the small closet she felt a rustle in the shirt pocket. It was a scrap of paper torn off a drawing pad; there was part of a pencil sketch on one side, on the other an address and telephone number.

Mrs. Moon hated to leave anything unfinished, despising untidiness in herself and others. She quickly changed into her town clothes and hung her discarded wet things in the tiny bathroom to dry. She found an apple and munched it as she made up her face and combed her still damp hair. The apple took the edge off her hunger, and she decided not to take the time to beg breakfast from the cook.

She carefully made the bed and tidied the small room, sweeping a few scattered ashes back into the fireplace. She checked her summer straw pocketbook for driver's license,

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car keys, money, and finding everything satisfactory, she paused for a moment in the center of the room. All was quiet, neat, and orderly. The spider still hung inert in the center of its web and one small fly was buzzing helplessly on its perimeter. Mrs. Moon smiled.

There was no time to weave now—indeed, there was no need. She could not really expect to find a conveniently deserted lake in a big city. No. She would have to think of something else.

Mrs. Moon stood in the doorway of the cabin in the early sunlight, a small frown wrinkling the placid surface of her round pink face. She scuffled slowly around to the back of the cabin and into the shadow of the sycamores beyond, her feet kicking up the spongy layers of years of fallen leaves, her eyes watching carefully for the right idea to show itself. Two grayish-white stones appeared side by side, half covered with leaf mold. Anonymous, faceless, about the size of canteloupes, they would do unless something better presented itself later.

Unceremoniously she dug them out of their bed, brushed away the loose dirt and leaf fragments, and carried them back to the car.

Mrs. Moon's watch had stopped sometime during the night, but as she got into the car she glanced at the now fully risen sun and guessed the time to be about six thirty or seven o'clock. She placed the two stones snugly on the passenger seat and covered them with her soft pale-blue cardigan. She started the engine, and then reached over and groped in the glove compartment. She never liked to drive anywhere without knowing beforehand the exact roads to take to get to her destination. The road map was there, neatly folded beneath the flashlight and the box of tissues.

Mrs. Moon unfolded the map and spread it out over the steering wheel. As the engine warmed up, Mrs. Moon hummed along with it. Her pudgy pink hand absently patted the tidy blue bundle beside her as she planned the most direct route to the girl in Minneapolis.

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

And now, once more, shall it be another somewhat unconventional jaunt into criticism? Let's try Nostalgia Road.

Each of us in mature years has had the experience of rereading some book which powerfully impressed his childhood. We approach reappraisal with disquiet. Can the once-loved volume still ensnare, or are the people of its story better left in limbo with Tom Swift, the Rover boys, even Frank Merriwell?

Certain favorite books will never disappoint. The great fictional detectives, Sherlock Holmes or Father Brown, rise undimmed and untarnished above the years. A touch of glory gilds Uncle Abner of old Virginia.

But many past favorites we encounter with a bump and shock of disillusion, as though aforetime we had been hoodwinked. "What was it?" groans the embarrassed dupe. "How *could* I have fallen for such claptrap?"

Now that's not all. As between these two views, acceptance or denial, honest rereading may induce still a third mood, just as valid though seldom mentioned. The most recent book from Bowling Green University Popular Press, *Master of Villainy, A Biography of Sax Rohmer* (cloth, $10.00; paper, $4.00), by Cay Van Ash and Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, irresistibly prompts me to speculate.

You might try this fine biography, written with care and gusto as well as a sense of humor, and ably edited by Robert E. Briney. The foreword, significantly or not, is dated at Salem, Mass.

Arthur Henry Ward, of Irish parentage despite English Midlands background, grew to manhood at the turn of the century. Though with small talent for journalism and none whatever for commerce, the youth had certain skills. A born storyteller, of wild but fairly disciplined fancy, he worked hard to master his craft. At first, in pride of that Patrick Sarsfield from whom his mother had claimed

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descent, he signed himself A. Sarsfield Ward. Later, having combined two Saxon words for his inspired *nom de plume*, he grew so accustomed to the name of Sax Rohmer that both he and Elizabeth, his wife, could forget it was not his own.

Bohemian, easy-going, he was a sound "beer and cheese" man with a taste for Jamaica rum. In the biography we follow him through early struggles to solvency, then success, golden rewards, a popularity even greater in America than at home. One American friend, Harry Houdini, showed him the only escape from a plot dilemma which threatened story catastrophe; the story was already appearing serially in *Collier's Magazine*.

Sax Rohmer touched many fields of mystery. With *Bat-Wing*, as early as 1921, he came very near straight detection. But he will remain best known as the creator of feline, high-shouldered Dr. Fu-Manchu, "with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan," lord of all poisons, "the Yellow Peril incarnate in one man."

Most readers in my own generation discovered this polished hobgoblin soon after World War I. Of thirteen Fu-Manchu novels in all, three had been published before the war's end. Though afterwards he suffered changes of aim or fortune, here the great scorpion towered at his best. Sheer hypnosis held us as Nayland Smith and Dr. Petrie, firing more shots than the gun-slingers of a Western film, stormed into yet another den of iniquity.

Those first three books, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, *The Return of Dr. Fu-Manchu*, and *The Hand of Fu-Manchu* are now Pyramid paperbacks modestly priced at 60¢.

You will no longer by hypnotized. But, ignoring any quality of the naive, you will find much ingenuity and some little excitement. If Nayland Smith sounds hysterical, if Fu-Manchu himself seems concerned less with efficient slaughter than with picturesque effect, please remember that this is the world before 1914—a lost world, an ordered world as yet unshaken by war, doubt, or even Freudian leer.

Today, at times, we travel down Nostalgia Road to that pleasant place where old enemies foregather without strife: the gaunt Burmese Commissioner Dr. Petrie with his beautiful slave-girl, Fu-Manchu resplendent in every robe. Let no carper object or condemn; they all dwell in Arcadia.

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an emotional thriller by

CORNELL WOOLRICH

A relatively "unknown" novelet by the late Cornell Woolrich, one of the great masters of the emotional thriller . . .

Marty's problem was "in reverse." Most people caught in his terrible predicament would have tried to avert or divert suspicion. Marty did the opposite: he tried to establish suspicion against himself. And not just suspicion. Certainty . . .

THE LIE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

The train wheels kept razzing me, clicking over the joints: "You got the gate! You got the gate! You got the gate!"

"Ah, shuddup!" I growled. "I been kicked out o' better colleges than that!" I hauled my valise down from the rack, yanked out the rye again. The whiskey was down to the bottom of the label now. I pushed it down farther still, to the fake bottom of the bottle—that hollow c[illegible] which the dirty gyps stick up inside the middle to fool you. Then I put the bottle back in the valise and got ready to sling it up again.

"Why don't you leave it down where it is?" the middle-aged man across the aisle asked, glowering over the top of his newspaper. "You'll be reaching up for it again in a minute. It's wearing me out watching you."

"Ah, shuddup!" I snapped. "What's matter with you—burning 'cause I didn't offer you any?"

He muttered something under his breath about doing his drinking with men, not with fresh college punks. When you've got a bay window, you've got to say things under your breath—leave an out for yourself. I wouldn't have hit him anyway; he wasn't my age.

Then he put on a paternal

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act, raised his voice so that I could hear it. "Credit to your father, you are! I know your type, son. I watched where you got on—and it's the middle of the semester. Bounced out on your ear, weren't you? Taking everything you can get from the old man and not giving anything back—only grief and gray hairs. If I were your father I'd be ashamed to admit it."

"If you were my father, so would I," I countered.

"Next stop Mansfield!" the conductor yelled. We were nearly there now. I left the valise down—but on that account, not because of what the old guy had said.

The familiar old hometown depot didn't cheer me any when I got off. I looked around me and thought: "That guy was right, at that. I'm a heel. What'd I ever do for the old man except give him wrinkles? And now this. A whole term's tuition fees shot to hell!"

I phoned home from the station to break the bad news as gently as possible—let them know I was on my way. I got a busy signal. I waited a while, tried again. Still in use. That must be Glad. Nobody but a woman could hog a wire that long. Then belatedly I remembered that he wouldn't be here anyway. This was Wednesday, and he always stayed over in Baltimore on Wednesdays. It was an hour and a half ride by train, and it was easier on him to stay over in the city one night a week.

As for Glad, she didn't rate high enough with me to bother making station announcements just for her benefit. So I went on ahead out without waiting any more. It was only a ten-minute ride by bus.

The quiet street looked the same as when I'd gone away earlier in the fall, except that now the leaves were all brown and curled-up and lying in piles on the sidewalk, instead of hanging on the trees. They hadn't done any new building since I'd been home last. We were still the last house out, separated by a block and a half of empty lots from the next to the last. Beyond was the beach, at right angles. They allowed horseback riding on the hard sand this late in the year.

There was a light burning cozily behind the ground-floor living-room window, although it wasn't quite dark out yet—just hazy, dark blue, Indian summer dusk. There was the same old defective flagstone sticking up out of the path that led to the porch steps. He'd always been intending to have it reset, and never had. Going in, it was all right, but the other way, coming from the house in the

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dark, you were liable to catch your foot on it and skin your nose. A collector once had done that, two summers ago, much to our united delight. He'd done his collecting by mail afterward.

I was whistling as I turned up the footpath. Coming back home is pleasant, even when you're in disgrace.

I didn't bother ringing when I got up on the porch. I just put my bag down and got out my own key. I shouldn't have been using it until Christmas at the earliest. But when I touched the lock with it, the door swung idly back before me. That was probably Glad again, barging in without bothering to close it firmly after her. She always had been dizzy about things like that. The peroxide must have affected her brains.

I pitched my hat at the old stag's head in the hall, scored on the far antler. I hadn't missed it once since I was fifteen. I parked the wad of gum I'd been mangling—to kill my breath—on the animal's glassy left eyeball. Even if he wasn't here, *she* was the kind who wouldn't pass up an opportunity of letting him know I'd come home with a snootful. One drink was a binge with her—where it concerned me. There'd been little more than an armed truce between us ever since he'd married her. I took a deep breath, to bolster me against her sarcasm, and went on in.

There wasn't anyone in the living room, in spite of the reading lamp I'd spotted through the window. On the little table next to the lamp, the phone was off the hook, the receiver dangling at the end of its cord. It must have been that way quite a while. It wasn't swinging any more, hung perfectly still. No wonder I hadn't been able to get the house from the station just now! More of that dizzy blonde's absent-mindedness. Or maybe she wasn't through talking yet—had gone off for a minute and left her party waiting?

I picked up the receiver and listened. It seemed to me I could hear the sound of someone breathing faintly at the other end. I wasn't sure. It might have just been a vibration along the open wire.

I said, "Hello?" questioningly, to make sure I wasn't cutting someone off by hanging up.

This time there *was* a startled intake of breath. I couldn't be mistaken. Someone had been waiting for a long time, and my unexpected baritone in their ear had caught them off-guard. An instant later

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there was an unmistakable click as the other end hung up.

I thought, Well I'll be—! Must have a guilty conscience, whoever you are! And it hadn't been the grocer or the butcher, don't worry. When the cat's away, you know.

I called her from where I was, beside the phone, and she didn't answer. But I knew she must be in the house somewhere, the way the phone and the lamp had been left.

She was. She was in their bedroom, just off the living room. The air was full of the sweet-pea scent she used, and she was all dressed to go out. And she'd gone out, sure enough—but not through the front door. She had on one of those great big bicycle-wheel hats that stay on with an elastic. You couldn't see her face, it was completely hidden. She had on the silver fox he'd given her last year, up over one shoulder, down under the other, biting its own fluffy tail. She was lying across the nearer of the twin beds, sort of *playfully* cuddled up, so help me, as though somebody had been tickling her or teasing her. Her legs were sort of drawn up against her body, as though to ward the other person off. I almost expected to hear her giggly, bubbly laughter in the room.

But she was just a little too far over the edge of the bed—just a little too still. I tilted the enormous hatbrim, peered under it. Her neck had been broken. Her head was flexible and could move any which way.

I gave a groan way down at the waist, and let the hatbrim go back over what it had been concealing. The sweet-pea perfume was awfully strong in the air. The house was awfully still. Outside you could hear the distant pounding of the surf on the deserted nightbound beach.

I thought, looking at her, So you didn't grow old the slow way, like you were always afraid of! I backed away a step or two, slowly. After all, there was no point in *leaning* over her. I'd have to get the cops. I'd have to phone to town and break it to him. I hated that part of it, especially hated to think what it would do to him. In a way she'd brought it on herself, leaving the front door ajar behind her as I'd found it.

Some prowler or sneak thief must have looked in, seen her alone there at the telephone, and—or more likely still, he'd broken in during her absence. She'd come back, heard him, caught him in the act of looting the place, and been killed. That explained her leaving the phone that way. Evidently, she hadn't

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had a chance to cry out, for the person she'd been talking to was still waiting on the line, unalarmed, when I came in. Never guessing what had caused the delay.

The twinkle on her ring finger caught my eye—the solitaire he'd given her when they were first married. The marauder hadn't been able to remove it, evidently. That often happens with rings.

I reached down—instinctively holding my breath—took her unpleasantly soft, rubbery hand in both of mine. I plucked at the ring gingerly to test it. I expected resistance. Instead, it slipped almost fluidly past the finger joint, dropped loosely on the bed. Rather than fitting too tightly, it fitted too loosely. I remembered now that she'd often remarked that she ought to have it cut to fit better.

Well then, maybe he hadn't seen it in his fright and rage. Maybe that explained his not taking it. Yet how could anyone have overlooked its flash and sparkle—with her hands up over her face to protect herself?

I turned toward the dresser, saw her handbag lying there in full sight. I opened it, emptied it out. Apart from the usual feminine fripperies—lipstick, powder, handkerchief—a tightly rolled wad of bills dropped out. More than the average housewife carries around for pin money. He'd always been generous with her, to a fault. I counted—$60.

What kind of burglar would leave $60 in cash and a diamond ring worth several thousands untouched? It looked as though perhaps robbery hadn't been the motive. To cinch the thing, I threw open the drawer, pulled out her jewel case. It was unlocked, of course. A rope of pearls, two or three rings, a barpin—even a twenty-dollar gold piece that she'd kept as a souvenir—all lay in it intact. Nothing, from what I knew of her possessions, was missing.

There was always the possibility that she had interrupted him before he could steal anything, that after he had killed her he'd lost his head and fled panic-stricken.

In any case it was the police's job to reconstruct the crime and its motive, not mine. The thing to do was notify them without further delay. I'd already been in the house at least five minutes.

I went back to the phone in the other room, picked it up without hesitation, jiggled the hook until I had the operator. I said in a firm, unhesitant voice, "Give me the police department, please."

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This part of it was easy. It was telling him that I didn't like thinking about. I wouldn't break it abruptly over the phone; I'd tell him she was ill or something, spare him the hour and a half's agony of riding out on the train, let him find out when he got—

"Police Headquarters."

"This is Martin Delavan, at 22 Beach Street South." Even to myself, my voice sounded almost too self-controlled for decency, as though I were ordering something from a druggist. But then, what's the good of pretending to feel something when you really don't? I was shocked at what I'd found, but I wasn't cut up. "I've just come back to the house here, and I've found my stepmother dead. Looks as though she's been—murdered. Better send somebody around."

"Don't worry," came the dry answer, "we will." And then automatically, "Don't touch anything—"

I hung up, opened my valise, and got out the well-worn rye, intending to polish it off while I was waiting for the cops. No, I told myself, I wasn't cut up about it. I wouldn't have wanted her killed. I was sorry she had been. But I hadn't had any illusions about her for years.

was more my own age than his. I'd seen little things, plenty of little things. Not enough to hang a person for maybe, but enough to show which way the wind blew. This cagey party on the phone that hung up so quickly just now when he heard a deep-toned voice—that was just one of many such little things. If I'd shut up until now, it was for his sake, not hers. I'd never been in the cheering section for her.

It was through the tilted bottle that I saw the newspaper. It had been there in a corner of the sofa the whole time, of course. But as the dregs of liquor splashed down toward the neck, there was a space of clear glass left at the bottom of the bottle, and through this, almost like through a magnifying glass, I saw the discarded newspaper lying there folded columnwise in a corner of the sofa. Now in Mansfield there is only one paper, a little local sheet that we never took.

An alarm clock went off in my heart as I set the bottle down. I was really frightened as I went toward that paper, crouched slightly forward above the waist like a man about to pounce on something that is liable to escape from him. I was really frightened, but I didn't try to figure out why.

I jerked it open. *BALTIMORE STAR* blackjacked my

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brain. I peered at the spidery dateline underneath: *Wednesday, November 3rd.* Today's paper! I focused on the little box up in the right-hand corner. "3 O'Clock Edition."

It wasn't quite seven yet! This paper had hit the stands in Baltimore only two hours ago, and Baltimore was an hour and a half's ride away! It had been brought out here by someone and not delivered by mail. Someone had picked it up, almost as soon as it hit the downtown stands—almost before the ink was dried on it—and carried it out here with him.

That word "someone" did things to me. It kept crying for identification, and I wouldn't let it—tried to force it to stay anonymous. But there were some things that I couldn't help knowing. The *Star* had always been *his* paper. Ever since we'd lived out here, he'd always bought it in the evening, to read on the train. He'd never subscribed to it by mail for that reason, because then it would have been delivered to the house.

I tucked it under my wing, as though to hide it from someone who was in the room with me. I whispered: "I can tell! There are other ways I can tell!" There was a bakelite ashtray on a stand just inside the door. I ran over to it, picked it up, held it under my eyes with both hands, like a crystal-gazer. It was so damnably simple! You couldn't smoke on the bus coming from the station. The natural thing for any smoker to do as he got off the bus was to light up. The cigarette, like a yardstick, would last from that bus stop just a puff or two past our front door. I'd found that out myself a thousand times. Just as you got in and closed the door behind you it was time to throw it away—unless you were one of the dilettantes who only smoke them halfway down.

But there was more to it than that, worse luck! Glad smoked one of the popular Big Four brands, as I did myself. And there was always lipstick on her butts anyway. He, who had grown up in the days before cellophane, when pictures of baseball players and battleships were given away with each pack of smokes, had stuck through thick and thin to a peculiar brand called Levant Deities—all Turkish tobacco and harsh as iron rust. They were more expensive than the ordinary kind, and with cork tips. She couldn't go them at all; she always hacked at the first whiff.

So in this dish there was just one butt, smoked down to a quarter length, with a cork tip,

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with no rouge on it, and with the trademark of Levant Deities just escaping obliteration at the charred end. And it wasn't left over from the night before. She had a cleaning woman in each morning whose pet hobby, whatever her other shortcomings, was cleaning out ashtrays.

I put the treacherous ashtray down, as though it were a wasp and had stung me. It was empty. My hand had darted into my coat pocket, so I'd secreted the clue in it.

I'd said just before, "I can tell if he was here!" Well, now I'd told, only too well, and the police were on the way, would be here in a minute! And I'd been the one who called them!

But it was Wednesday, the day he worked late at the office! That was the one ray of light left, the one hope still in my heart. For years and years—ever since I'd been a kid, while my mother had still been alive—he'd stayed over in the city on Wednesdays, and then made up for it by not going in at all on Saturdays, taking the whole week-end off. A cigarette, a newspaper, they couldn't change that unalterable fact, that habit of a lifetime. I wouldn't let them.

I grabbed the phone and my voice wasn't as calm as when I'd notified the police. I said, "Gimme Baltimore, quick! Harrison and Caroll, the import and export firm." I couldn't remember the street address in my frenzy, but she got them for me anyway.

I said, "Let me talk to George Delavan right away. This is his son, it's urgent!"

The office girl said, "Mr. Delavan left at five, his usual time."

"But it's Wednesday," I choked, "he always stays—"

"Yes, I know," she agreed. "But he said something about not feeling well—"

"When he left, did he say whether he was going home or not?" It was a futile thing to ask. As long as he'd left, what difference did it make where he was going?

"Not exactly, but I took that for granted. As I recall it, all he said was that he didn't feel up to staying tonight and was knocking off—"

"Goodbye," I said. It was more than just a formal phrase of conclusion. The one ray of light was gone now. My last hope was shattered. The cigarette, the newspaper, the broken Wednesday habit—they had me pinned to the mat.

It was my grief from the beginning—my party from the moment I had hung up that phone. You've got to understand that. There was no hesitation, no hanging back; no

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questioning, no mental reproach, no attaching of blame. What had happened, had happened, and that was all there was to it. He'd been just my old man until now—just the party that wrote the checks I blew. Now he was me, and I was he.

The keen of a police car sounded far off in the distance somewhere, grew louder and clearer as it turned down Beach Street South, back there at the main highway where the buses ran.

I was running back to where she was, skidding the rugs out from under my feet on the slippery living-room floor. I darted over to her, grabbed one of her stiff clawlike little hands—they were not so limp and rubbery now—the one with the ring on it, and raked it down my cheek, first on one side, then the other. The manicured, sharp-pointed nails burned.

I turned toward the mirror, tugged my necktie by the knot all the way around over my left shoulder, ran a mauling hand through my sleeked hair till it stood up like a floor mop. A few long hairs came out, and I went back, looped one of them around one of her fingernails and left it that way. The four white lines on each of my cheeks were slowly turning pink, and stinging like the devil. I ran out into the kitchen with the *Baltimore Star*, shoved it in the stove, dropped a match on top of it.

The siren had risen to an intolerable screech, broken off short in front of our door. The pounding of fists took up where it had left off; the whole porch shook with their racket. I plunged back into the living room, dove onto the sofa, feet and all, and stretched out there.

I had one minute more left to myself, and that was the last from then on. I couldn't help thinking of that guy on the train coming down this afternoon and what he'd said. He should see me now! I thought. I said to myself, I'm just a drunken bum, yeah, that's all. I never was any good to him before. Well, this is my chance now. They're not going to take this away from me. This is about all I've got. I've run up a bill on him for twenty-one years that's nobody's business. Maybe this is the only ready cash I'll ever have to pay him back. They're not gonna short-change me! Why should I let it make hash out of his life? She wasn't worth it; she had it coming to her.

I only hoped he'd made it back all right. That's where I figured he must have gone, right back to the city after it was

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over. Only I hoped he wouldn't lose his head. If he kept cool he could cover himself beautifully. He only had three hours to account for, after he'd left the office. He could have gone to a show in the city, fallen asleep at it; taken a walk in the park; hired a room to rest up in—any one of those things would do.

The important thing was, he had never left there. He had *never left there.* I'd find a way of getting that across to him. They mustn't question him separately, before I had a chance to do it. There were lots of pitfalls ahead, but I figured I could buck them all right, if he'd cooperate with me. Her nail tracks on my cheeks, the skin scrapings they'd find under her fingers, ought to do the trick. I couldn't think of anything else.

My whole problem, you see, was in reverse. Most people tried to avert suspicion in a case like this; my chief worry was to establish it—against myself. Not just suspicion; certainty.

The minute was up now, the merry-go-round under way. They quit biffing at the door when they belatedly discovered it was unlocked on the inside and they could come in by merely turning the knob. That didn't give me a very high idea of their brilliance, at the very start of the thing. It shouldn't be too hard to wangle this.

A husky figure flashed in with surprising swiftness, said something about: "What's the idea trying to keep us out?" and was already in the other room with her by the time my answer came.

"I wasn't trying to keep you out. If you can't get in without help, that's your lookout. I'm no butler."

A second figure came in, a third. The first one came out of where she was, the other two went in; the first one went back in again, the other two came out. I'd never seen such a dizzy rushing around in my life before. Someone picked up the phone and gave our address. They finally stood still long enough for me to get my eyes focused on them. Stood around me in a semicircle.

One was a six-footer with a mane of silver hair and the complexion of an eighteen-year-old boy. And plenty tough. Every remark he made was like the rumble of a train going by underground. The second was nearer my own age—although he had me beat by about ten years—with an unruly forelock and a network of fine little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes that gave an impression of high intelligence. The third was just a harness bull.

I looked up at them

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solemnly, but unperturbed.

The six-footer tom-tommed: "Did you kill her?"

I tipped my chin up higher. "Sure, I killed her! Who then?"

The wrinkles around the other one's eyes contracted, then expanded again. He didn't say anything.

"Pretty cool about it, aren't you?"

I said, "Bring her back to life—and I'll do it over again, with equal pleasure, if not more."

They just looked at me curiously, all three of them.

"She your stepmother, did you say?"

"That's right, Gladys Delavan. I—"

"Save it till Endicott gets here."

They were just killing time until their lieutenant or somebody showed up. The cop took up a position at my right shoulder, one hand on it to restrain me, although I wasn't making any evasive move and didn't intend any.

The younger man had me stand up; he searched me, then let me sit down again on the sofa. I saw his eyes rest briefly on the left tongue of my vest, on the pin there. He spoke for the first time, reading the Greek characters, "Delta Tau Zeta. What chapter?"

"Princemouth," I said.

He looked thoughtfully down at his own pin, on his own vest tab, then turned away abruptly. I just shrugged, mentally if not physically.

A guy from the pitiful local paper that I've already mentioned wandered in from the street without permission, and the cop, at the older dick's order, promptly turned him around by the collar and threw him out.

Right after that, Endicott, the lieutenant of detectives, showed up and they got the wheels going under me. They held me out in the hall, under the stag's head, while the police photographers were busy in there with her. The house, meanwhile, was overrun with people, blazing with lights, and there were half a dozen official cars parked in front of it. The only thing that stayed the same was the endless moan of the surf, up there at the end of the street in the dark.

Finally I was brought in for questioning. Gladys, meanwhile, must have been taken out the back way, for she hadn't passed me. But the bed was now empty.

Endicott was seated with a police stenographer on each side of him. After they'd taken down my name and age, he said, "Now I'll ask you to reconstruct your crime for us,

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Delavan, step by step. You say you're a senior at Princemouth University. What brought you down here at this particular time, unannounced?"

I said, "I was brought up before the Dean this morning and expelled."

"For what reason?"

"For tethering a mule in the chapel."

Steele, the younger dick, was the only one present who seemed to see anything funny in that. He took his hand and slowly shaded it across his mouth.

"Very well, go ahead."

"I took the early afternoon train at Princemouth Junction, and got out here about six. I telephoned twice from the station, and the line was busy. I took a bus to the house without waiting. I came in without making any noise, and from the hall out there could hear this woman, my stepmother, talking on the phone—in this room that we're in."

The pencils of the stenogs were skipping like lightning bugs across the ruled pages of their pads, making erratic shorthand loops and pothooks.

"I heard enough to know that—she was up to her old tricks again."

The police lieutenant said, "What do you mean?"

"I refuse to amplify that." If I attacked her character I attacked *him*, too, through her. "She left the phone abruptly, when she discovered my presence." They exchanged a look among the three of them; they understood what I meant now. "I followed her into the bedroom. She was dressed to go out."

This part of it, the homicidal climax, was full of pitfalls. I had to go very carefully. I sensed they were going to ask me to reenact it before their eyes. One minute digression and I was undone—proven guiltless.

"Then?" said Endicott.

"I didn't say anything." *He* wouldn't have either, once he reached such a pitch; my lifelong knowledge of his character helped me there. "I simply grabbed her neck between my hands, she raked my face with her nails as we fell side by side on the bed, and the next thing I knew she was dead. Her neck was broken."

Steel said, "You didn't intend to do it?"

"No, I didn't—as far as one can tell about those things."

"What did you do then?" Endicott asked. The flipping of the pages of the shorthand pads was almost continuous, like the whirr of an electric fan.

"I stood there looking down at her—it took me a minute to realize she was gone." A chasm

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yawned here, and I was perfectly aware of it, but it had to be bridged. I hadn't forgotten for a moment what I'd been foolish enough to say when I'd first called them: that I'd come in and *found* her killed. That had to be corrected.

I did it in this way: "First I was going to run away, leave the house as far behind me as possible. It didn't take me very long to realize how foolish that would be. I downed that idea. My second impulse was to bluff it out, pretend somebody else had done it, that I'd come in and found her that way. I even went so far as to phone in to you people and put it that way. But then while I was waiting for you to get here, I thought it over. I saw that I could never get away with it. No one ever does. I made up my mind the only thing to do was make a clean breast of it, tell the whole truth. I have."

Again the wrinkles around the eyes of the man named Steele expanded, contracted, as he studied me. I wondered what he was thinking. I warned myself, "I've got to watch out for *you.*"

One of the stenogs parked a portable typewriter on Glad's pet coffee table, took off the lid, began to type from the shorthand transcript. I said involuntarily, "Hey, better get that thing off there before it mars the varnish, she'll have a fi—!" There was an instant's awkward silence as I broke off short. I rubbed the back of my neck apologetically with one hand, murmured abashed, "I forgot—I killed her."

They asked me to reenact it, as I had expected them to. A truck drew up, some powerful incandescent lamps were brought in and turned on, and in a vivid acetylene-bright glare, under the remorseless lens of a motion-picture camera, I reenacted the whole thing, step by step. For the first time, although they thought it was the second.

Endicott ordered, "Do this slowly, Delavan, so you don't blur the film."

That was all to the good; it gave me time to think before each move I made. And I needed to think. This was all improvisation. Steele's furrowed eyes never left my face, I noticed. The others watched what moves I made, he watched only my face.

I started from the porch, came in through the door with my valise in one hand. Again I flung my hat at the deer's antler—and connected. I pretended to park a wad of gum on its glass eyeball. Then I cocked my head, edged up sidewise

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against the frame of the living-room door. "This is when I first heard her voice. I took two steps farther and appeared in the opening. She hears me, hangs up, retreats toward the bedroom."

The lieutenant speared his thumb, said abruptly, "Steele, you're Gladys Delavan." No one snickered; it wasn't funny. "Now tell him what to do," he said to me.

"You go backward, facing me, until you're in there. You stand with the small of your back against the dresser edge, arms out at your sides clutching it."

I went in after him; they all came in after me, even the camera. "I stood there on the threshold, glaring at her. She snapped out of it, regained her composure, faced me defiantly. She reached for the handbag lying there, evidently to take it up, march past me and out of the house to her appointment. That brought it on. I sprang—like this—caught her neck—"

Steele's eyes kept looking into mine from an inch away, questioning, questioning. I shifted mine to the bed; there was another pitfall here. The impression where her body had lain was still plainly visible, but there was only one impression there—not two. Yet I'd distinctly said we'd fallen *side by side* as I killed her. Being heavier, my body should have made an even deeper impression than hers. Yet there was no second one at all. She'd obviously been killed from above, without the killer touching the bed at all. The only thing to do was make the impression now, and pray the absence of one wouldn't show in the "still" photographs they'd already taken.

"You go off balance, backward onto the bed," I instructed Steele. "As you hit it, raise your hands, crook your fingers, rake my face." He did it awkwardly, but he did it. We flopped together, and the springs groaned. "That's all. A minute later she was dead."

I got up. Steele got up more slowly after me, straightening his collar.

They took me back into the other room with them. Endicott read over the confession the stenogs had finished typing, then read it through a second time aloud to me. "Are you prepared to sign this the way it stands?"

"Give me a pen."

I wrote *Martin Delavan* firmly at the bottom of it. My signature has always been clear cut, highly legible, not one of those scrawls. This specimen came out a beauty, clean as a whistle.

Just as I finished and

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straightened up again, there was a slight commotion at the front door where two cops were on duty, one outside on the porch, the other inside in the hall. The latter came in, whispered something to Endicott. Endicott looked at me, nodded to him. The cop went outside again, came back with my father.

He was still white with the fright those cops at the door had given him. He didn't see me right away. I was offside. He saw Endicott first.

"What's the trouble here in my house?" Then he looked at me. "Marty, what are you doing home this time of year? Where's Glad?"

I thought, Good acting! Just the right way to carry it off! But when he finds out I'm taking over, will he stick to it? That was what had me worried. Gone was all the coolness I'd mustered until now. Threads of hot sweat were lining down my forehead, and my face must have been as gray as his with the strain.

I couldn't signal him. I couldn't tip him off in any way, without tipping them off too. I just kept staring at him, glaring at him, hoping he could read my eyes. *Keep quiet! Don't open your mouth! Everything's under control. I've sold them—don't spoil my build-up.*

I answered steadily, "I don't want to shock you, but Glad's dead."

He gave a spasmodic heave, up off his heels, down again.

"Killed," I added.

He heaved again.

"By me," I wound up.

He collapsed into a chair. And now if it was coming, it was coming. "No, Marty, no, you couldn't have—" he gasped.

"Shut up!" I roared, to drown out the rest of it, forestall it. "*I* did it, I tell you! *I* did it!" And I punctuated each "I" by stabbing my own chest with my index finger, trying to get the unspoken message through: *I did it, not you—let me tell it my way.* It was the best I could do, under three pairs of searching eyes.

He moaned through his hands, "Gentlemen, he couldn't have—"

Endicott said inexorably: "He just signed a full confession, reenacted the thing before a camera. He seems to think he could. And so do we!"

I pounded at him, "What do you know about it, anyway? You were in Baltimore until now. You weren't here. You were in Baltimore until now. You weren't here!" Over and over, to make it sink in.

Endicott held his head distractedly. "Get him out of here, you men. He's like a

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phonograph needle caught in a record groove! Take him downtown and book him. Have him bound over for the Grand Jury."

Steele said, "Bend your elbow," and the teeth of a twinkling manacle nipped around my wrist.

As they led me past him he was still sitting there in a state of semi-collapse, hands before his face. I stopped a minute directly in front of him, reached out with my free hand, took one of his down, uncovering his grief. I couldn't give it any voice, the dick was right at my cuff. My lips moved soundlessly. "You were in Baltimore—"

On the footpath leading out to the public sidewalk I warned, "Watch this flagstone ahead." Steele heard me in time, but the other dick, the one with the white hair, stubbed his toe and went tottering comically a few steps.

The ride to Headquarters was made in silence. Only one remark was made the whole way. That was by me. "Swell night tonight," I said. They didn't answer.

The booking didn't take long. Then I was led into an upper-tier cell in the moldy old county jail. Steele, as he finished opening the handcuffs and turned to go, mimicked insinuatingly under his breath, "You were in Baltimore tonight." The gate clanged closed behind him as I stiffened, frightened, and stared after him.

The man ahead of me in the lineup was a pickpocket and shoplifter who worked department stores. They were making him show how he did it. He had a glove filled with sawdust stitched to his empty coat sleeve. He kept his own hand under his coat, darted it in and out.

"Next prisoner."

The cop motioned me forward. I went out halfway across the narrow runway, in the sizzling glare of lights that rendered my eyes useless. From the impenetrable blackness behind the lights a voice spoke, through a microphone. "Your name?"

"Martin Delavan," I said.

"Ever been arrested before?"

"Yes."

"What were the charges?"

"No charges were pressed. I was brought back to my house under arrest—for smashing a grocery-store window with a baseball. I was nine."

Someone tittered slightly.

"Did you kill Gladys Delavan?"

I tilted my chin. "I sure did."

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"All right. That's all. Step down." The cop motioned me off at the opposite side from which I'd gone on.

He was sitting there waiting for me alone in a little room across the hall from the D.A.'s office. All the preliminaries were over. I'd been indicted, and they were going to start picking jurymen the following week.

He'd been thoroughly searched, I suppose, and the window was cross-barred, otherwise they wouldn't have let him see me alone like that. Steele had wangled the interview for me. The armed guard closed the door on us and stayed on the other side.

He said, "Marty, Cosentino's going to wash his hands of the case unless you let him into your confidence more fully."

I said in a loud voice, "I killed her. What's he want me to do, show him my appendix?" I signaled him warningly with one finger, went over close to him, put my mouth against his ear. "Dictaphone in here some place. Must be, or they wouldn't have allowed this interview so readily. Watch yourself, don't say anything." Then inconsistently I added, "Keep talking while I look."

He was supposed to know what I meant. He didn't act as though he did. He said, "Marty, I still can't believe it—"

I was down on my hands and knees, looking up and down the four legs of the table in the middle of the room. After that I turned over the edges of the rug. Finally I went over to the old-fashioned top-heavy steam radiator in the corner. I snapped my fingers at him. A wire ran unnoticeably down the shadowy steampipe that speared through the ceiling.

I grabbed, pulled like a harpist. It snapped, came down broken. I ran over to him. "You're not going to let me down, are you? You haven't said anything, have you?" I panted hurriedly.

"About what?" He looked mystified.

"About you."

"What's there to say?"

I grabbed him enthusiastically by the shoulders. "Good. Swell. Keep it that way." And yet I wondered why, in my heart, I was just a little disappointed in him. As if I hadn't expected him to take things this much for granted. It was necessary for him to play that part in front of *them*, not when the two of us were alone together like this.

There was no more time to say anything else after that. Steele came barging in with a face like sour milk, glanced at

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the cut across my hand where the wire had torn the skin. "I thought so! Wise guy, eh?" he said. He motioned the guard in. "Come on, back to bed!"

I said to my father, "So long now. Keep your chin up," and followed the guard out.

Steele came to see me in my cell the following day. I greeted him satirically. "Don't mind the way the place looks. Just forty rooms, but it's home."

He sat down on the opposite bunk and offered me a cigarette.

"Poisoned?" I suggested as I took it.

"Don't be like that," he said patiently. He had something on his mind, I could tell. He opened the conversation in a funny way, though. "Is old Van Wyckoff still heading the Applied Psychology course at Princemouth?"

"Yep. Were you one of his boys?"

He said, "You must have failed, didn't you? Because you're lousy in applied psychology."

"I'll take an extension course from the Death House," I promised him.

He went ahead: "You're asking me to believe you killed that woman? There was no hysteria there, no nervous reaction. *Until* your father showed up that night. Then: 'You were in Baltimore, you were in Baltimore!' Maybe the rest muffed that, I didn't. So what happened? So you had me believing maybe he wasn't."

My heart started to tick faster. I sat very quiet. I let the cigarette fall and didn't go ahead with it.

"So I made it my business to find out whether he was or not. I checked his movements like no one's were ever checked before; double-checked them, triple-checked, quadruple-checked. I didn't leave a split second unaccounted for—"

I could hardly breathe any more; I did my best to keep my face up on my shoulders, but it felt like it wanted to slide down to my feet. He kept watching me while he spoke, the wrinkles around his eyes tight as chiffon. "Wouldn't you like to know what I found out?"

"Don't! You bum, I can't stand it!" I balled a fist, ground it between my eyes.

"Well, I found out—" He blew smoke up his face with his underlip. "He was just where he said he was. He *was* in Baltimore, at a Turkish bath, from the time he left his office at five until he took the train home three hours later and found us there. He felt under the weather, even fainted in the steam room, had to be attended

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by a doctor. I've questioned that doctor. I've questioned the rubbers and attendants. I've questioned the two taxi drivers, the one that took him there, the one that took him away. Now where does that leave you, Sonny Boy? A guy can't very well murder a woman in Mansfield while he's lying stripped getting an alcohol rub in Baltimore!"

The whole cell was slowly pivoting around me like a carousel. I managed to get out faintly, "But who said he did? Nobody—"

"No," he said, "but that's why you're in here, to make sure they wouldn't. You're not fooling me any. Do you still feel the same way about it now? There's a difference between taking a rap for your old man and taking it for some unknown stranger."

I said warily, "How do I know this isn't a frameup? How do I know he's in the clear like you say?" Even that much was a giveaway, I knew, but I couldn't help it.

"Well," he said, "I went to the same school you did. I'm a fraternity brother of yours."

I sliced my hands at him disgustedly. "That doesn't mean a thing—we're not kids any more."

"I could give you my word of honor," he said. And added quickly, "Careful now, if you make any cracks about that I'll hang one on your jaw."

I looked him over, taking my time about it. "Maybe I'm a sucker," I said. "I'll take your word of honor."

"Given!"

"All right, I didn't kill her, Steele. I thought my father did."

Word of honor or no word of honor, I couldn't bring myself to mention the newspaper and cigarette butt to him. That was too dangerous—might give them a weapon against him even yet for all I knew, even though both had been destroyed.

"I knew you didn't," he said almost off-hand, "in a million ways." He got up, started to pace back and forth between the cell bunks. "Kid," he said, "I don't want to frighten you, but this thing's gone way past your control—or mine. It's almost past stopping now; the mills of the gods, you know. It'll take a lot more than your say-so to get you out of it at this late day. I can't go in to Endicott or the D.A. and say, 'Now Delavan says he didn't do it, it's all a mistake.' The D.A. is only human; he doesn't want *you* to go to the chair just because you're you, but he does want *someone* to go to the chair for killing Gladys D.

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Rather than have no one go, he'll send you, right or wrong.

"In other words I only have negative evidence that you didn't do it, to offer. I've got to have positive evidence that somebody else did do it, I've got to have that somebody else himself, before we can reasonably expect him to lay off you. The Blind Lady with the bandage over her eyes and the scales has to have her burnt offering—and brother, you sure handed them the match yourself!"

He walked about three blocks in my four-by-eight cell. Finally he said almost pleadingly, "Can't you help me out in any way?"

I just ducked my head and grabbed the back of my neck in a half nelson and stared down at a cockroach making a Cook's Tour on the floor.

His big foot came down like a paddle—thwack!—and no more cockroach. "That's you," he said, "unless you can gimme something to get my teeth into! It's not my hide that's going to get fried. But I'm funny that way; all else being equal I'd rather see the right party short-circuited—or even none at all—than the wrong one."

The newspaper, the cigarette, were all I had, but they still pointed at my father more than to anyone else.

He said finally, "Well, I gotta get out of here, before I get accused of taking bribes. Guard!"

It didn't come to me until the cell gate had already clashed after him and his and the turnkey's footsteps were receding down the cement corridor. Then something came—for what it was worth. I jumped up, rattled the bars, yelled through them: "Steele! Come back here a minute!"

The turnkey didn't reopen. I had to tell it to Steele through the bars, but we shooed him off out of earshot.

"I just remembered something! And it's all I can give you, so I hope it's some good. In my confession I said she hung up when she found out she was being overheard, remember? She didn't. *That line was open the whole time she was being killed!* Whoever was on it was tuned in on the murder from start to finish. And somebody *was* on it; it wasn't just a dead wire because I said hello into it before I'd found her body and somebody caught their breath and hung up."

"That could get us something," he agreed. "That could get us a honey of a material witness. Not an eyewitness, but at least an earwitness." He

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started to talk faster and faster as his engine warmed up. Shifting weight from one foot to the other, practically hopping up and down out there in the corridor. "What was the date? November third—around six in the evening, right? It was already going on when you got off your train and tried to reach the house from the station? Let's give ourselves a break—say it had already been under way five minutes—"

"You don't know her. She used to live on the phone. Ten or fifteen would be more like it!"

"Another ten while you waited, put in your second call. Ten to ride out on the bus. Another five to walk to the house, hang up your hat and chewing gum, say hello into it—before it finally broke. It was at least a half-hour call, and maybe even forty-five minutes. Whoever made it would pay plenty of overtime on it! I'm gonna examine the phone company's records like a cross-eyed auditor—and every call of half an hour or more, around six o'clock on November third, I'm gonna track down to a fare-thee-well. The right one's on somebody's bill for that month."

He shoved his arm through the bars, punched me encouragingly on the shoulder. "Stick with Cosentino. Recant your confession in case I can't turn up anything before you go to trial—" His brogues went clattering down the stairs at the end of the cell block, going somewhere in a hurry.

I turned and looked down at what was left of the cockroach on the floor. "Maybe you're not me at that, who can tell?" I said to it.

It was when the courtroom attendants started tacking up a sheet on the wall opposite the jury box and pulling down the windowshades to darken the room that I knew it was all over but the shouting. They were going to show the film reenactment as evidence. That was about all I needed to go down for the third time.

It was the fourth day of the trial, and Cosentino hadn't been able to do much. And if you knew his rep and record that'll give you an idea of what he was up against. The prosecution had cleverly switched the emphasis on the motive. They omitted entirely the one I'd given them myself, about her stepping-out proclivities—and I wouldn't let Cosentino bring it up, for my father's sake. You see, that might have swung a modicum of sympathy my way. Instead they played up an entirely different one—her righteous

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indignation at my expulsion from school and my drunkenness, and the smarting, motherly tongue-lashing she must have delivered, which had resulted in my turning on her and breaking her neck.

To get this over, they made mincemeat of my character and reputation. I have to admit that neither was whole-sirloin even before they got busy on them. They went so far back into my past that I was surprised they didn't offer a pair of my diapers as Exhibit A. Expelled from three colleges in two years for drunkenness and unruliness! Well, I had been, but this was no time to brag about it. They even dug up the middle-aged grouch who'd bawled me out on the train coming down that afternoon, and he clinched it. I'd drunk my way down from Princemouth Junction to Mansfield; I'd been in an ugly, dangerous mood. When he'd ventured to make a kindly remonstrance to me I'd all but caught him by the throat and given him what I gave her later. What had saved him was probably that we were on a crowded public train at the time.

What more natural, the State asked suavely, than to visualize what had occurred a few minutes later in that lonely, isolated house near the beach, when I reeled in to be met by her well-earned upbraiding? And, moreover, I was so calloused, so conscienceless, that I had freely admitted I had done it, I had willingly reenacted the ghastly scene on celluloid. Far from showing remorse, I had gloried in it. Only now that I was about to meet my just deserts was I denying it—to save my own worthless neck.

Through it all I tenaciously withheld the key to my shouldering the blame from them all, even Cosentino. It hamstrung him. He couldn't tell them *why* I'd said I was guilty, if I wasn't, because I didn't let him know. If I told *why*, I'd have to tell *what* had given me that idea—the *Baltimore Star* and the Deities cigarette butt—and what would be the result? Even though Steele's thoroughgoing investigation saved my father from accusation, from being brought to trial in my place, he would go through the rest of his life with the moral stigma of guilt attached to him. People would say, "If his own son found strong enough proof at the time to be convinced he did it, he must have done it. Where there's smoke there's fire. He got away with it by a fluke." The one thing I wanted to avoid.

I took the stand in my own

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defense, but it harmed rather than helped. Two points from the State's redirect-examination of me will show why.

"You say you did not kill Mrs. Delavan?"

"No, I did not."

"Did you sign this confession willingly or was it obtained by force?"

"I signed it willingly." I was under oath, remember; I'm old-fashioned that way.

"Then if you did not kill her, why did you sign this confession willingly?"

What could I say? "I refuse to answer."

The lights went out, and the buzz and spitting of the motion-picture projection machine there in the courtroom was my *coup de grace.* There we were again as on that night, Steele taking the part of the murdered woman.

The lights went on, the screen was rolled up, and I knew I was a goner.

"The State rests."

Cosentino whispered to me, "For the last time, Marty, will you give me your reason for shouldering the blame that night? I warn you, unless you do we've lost this jury. I can't swing them."

"I'm sorry, I can't give you my reason."

He stood up before the bench to say the defense rested too. "If it please your Honor—" Suddenly an attendant stood beside him, whispering something. He asked the judge for a minute's delay, went back with the man.

I turned my head and saw Steele sitting back there with another man. He must have come in while the lights were out—he hadn't been in the room earlier. Cosentino was bending over, whispering to him. He came back and said he would like to call one last witness for the defense.

"Will William J. Simmons please take the stand?"

The man beside Steele got up reluctantly, came down the aisle, was sworn in.

Cosentino began, "You were acquainted with Mrs. Gladys Delavan?"

The man looked embarrassed. "I was."

"Were you in love with her?"

The man colored, delayed answering. Steele must have stood up in his seat back there. Simmons suddenly found his voice and said, "Yes," unhappily.

"Tell the court what you heard over the telephone to Mrs. Delavan's house on the evening of November third last."

"I called Mrs. Delavan at twenty minutes of six and

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asked if she was ready to meet me. We had dinner together—every Wednesday, when Mr. Delavan stayed over in Baltimore," he faltered guiltily.

"Go on."

"She said she was ready to leave and had only been waiting to hear from me in order to know where to meet me. We were discussing various places when suddenly she broke off short and said, 'Wait, I think I hear someone at the door.' I waited, then suddenly I heard her say in a sharp, clear voice, 'What do you mean by coming here? I told you I never wanted to see you again. I'm through with you. Now get out!'

"Then a man's voice said, 'So you're through with me, are you?' There was a moment's silence, then I heard Mrs. Delavan scream out from another room nearby, 'Don't, Steve, you're hurting me!' I didn't know what to do; I was afraid to call for help, because of my own awkward position. I kept saying, 'Gladys? Gladys? Are you all right?'

"I didn't hear anything more after that for a long time. I thought maybe she'd run out of the house to get away from him, and I waited for her to come back. Then a door opened and a new voice said, 'Glad?' and suddenly it said, 'Hello?' into the phone. I hung up."

"Are you sure it was not the same voice as the first one?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure. It was deeper, more educated."

"That's all." Cosentino said to the jury, "Would Mrs. Delavan have said to anyone who had a right to be in that house, who belonged there, such as her husband or her stepson, 'What do you mean by coming here? Now get out'? Would she have called this defendant, whose given name is Martin, 'Steve'?" He let that sink in. Then he said, "I'm going to call one of the State's own witnesses back to the stand. Will Detective Allen Steele please step up?"

Steele had a strip of plaster over one eye, I noticed, and another on his chin.

"You have previously testified that the prisoner said he killed the dead woman when you arrived at the house—also that the confession was signed by him willingly and the motion picture we have just seen was acted by him without compulsion. Now I am going to ask you something that was *not* asked of you until now. Is it your opinion, in your capacity as detective detailed to this case, that this defendant killed Gladys Delavan?"

Steele said in a ringing clarion-like voice that carried all over the room, "I am certain

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that he did not! I have proof!"

"Will you please explain to the court in your own words what it consists of?"

Steele crossed his legs, held up three fingers, and told one off. "First of all," he said, "the scratches on both his cheeks, supposedly inflicted by the dead woman. You all saw them in the enlarged 'still' photos of the prisoner taken that same night. Didn't it occur to any of you that the thumbnail track, which stood farther out from the other four and was fainter, because the thumb is a shorter digit, was on the *inside* on one cheek, on the *outside* on the other, thus proving the same hand was used to stroke both cheeks? Since when does a woman fighting for her life use only one hand to defend herself, taking time off to claw first one cheek, then the other? Was this a love match or a death struggle? If further proof's necessary, our own laboratory findings will bear me out. Skin scrapings were found only under the nails of one hand, the right; the left was completely without them. What's the answer? The defendant obviously inflicted the scratches himself, *with* the woman's hand, after her death."

"Anything else?" asked Cosentino, beaming.

"Well, nothing much," said Steele imperturbably, "only that I have a man named Steve Clark in custody who admits *he* killed her. I arrested him in Baltimore this morning on my own initiative—"

When the hubbub and noise had subsided sufficiently for him to make himself heard, the judge said, "Bring him before the court."

"I can't, your Honor," said Steele innocently, fingering the plaster strips on his face. "He's under guard in the hospital. I have his signed confession here with me, however." Then, as if by afterthought, he added, "This one wasn't given willingly, though."

Cosentino was saying above the roar of laughter that went up: "I move that the case against this defendant be dismissed."

Pokk! went the judge's gavel. "Case dismissed."

I looked at Allen Steele as we both stood up, I from the prisoner's bench, he from the witness stand. The fine network of wrinkles around his eyes contracted, expanded again, as his eyes met mine. What you might call an optical grin.

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a *NEW* crime story by

H. R. F. KEATING

A weather forecast, an unwelcome guest, an isolated cottage, a watering of the beans—add a few more ingredients and it becomes a recipe for murder . . .

A LITTLE RAIN IN A FEW PLACES

by H. R. F. KEATING

"A Little Rain in a Few Places," Stephen Elliot said, his long thin fingers dropping the wooden latch of the sitting-room door squarely into place. "It would make a marvelous title—except you could never fit it to a murder story."

"It would make a bloody awful title for any sort of story," Roger Bruce answered, padding heavily on his "sailor's bare feet" to the oak cupboard where Stephen kept his whiskey. "What is it anyhow, the weather forecast?"

"Yes, I heard it on the kitchen radio while I was putting in the chicken to roast."

"Good," said Roger, his broad brick-red hands busy with the drink. "I'll still be able to work in the open tomorrow."

Tomorrow. That, Stephen told himself as he wriggled into a corner of the sofa, would not be like all the other wrecked days of this long hot July. Tomorrow the whole garden would not ring to the clatter of Roger's typewriter as he put that salt-sprayed cardboard hero of his through yet another unlikely piece of aggressive behavior. Tomorrow at dusk, Stephen told himself, there would be a whiskey to savor on his own and in peace.

On his own, though it ought to have been with Victoria.

At the thought of her Stephen allowed himself one measured glance of hate at Roger's back as his unwelcome guest stood, legs typically far

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apart, looking out at the long view of quiet unpeopled pastures. Stephen spelled out to himself once again just what Roger had done to him. The final reading of the indictment.

Whereas Miss Victoria Lester had agreed to marry Stephen the day he unexpectedly won the Bloody Dagger Award of the Crime Writers Society; whereas at the subsequent presentation of the Award two months and twelve days later, Roger Bruce, a past president of the society, meeting Victoria for the first time, had so enticed her that she had eyes only for him; whereas Roger Bruce, having already been twice married, had announced a fortnight later that Victoria was to be the third Mrs. Bruce, no doubt in due course to divorce him like her two predecessors, for cruelty; whereas—

Only, Stephen broke into his own reverie, on each previous occasion the Judge had made it quite clear that the cruelty was by no means the romantic whip stuff that the Roger Bruce books would lead one to expect.

This flick of inner malice gave Stephen toughness enough to acknowledge his final humiliation—Roger's self-invitation to come to Stephen's cottage for "three or four weeks of peace and quiet to write my next book." Three weeks for a book, and it would sell five times better than his own! And then the crowning insult: "Must get away from Vicky's nattering, you know, and she'll never dare come back to your shack."

Shack, indeed. It might need a good many small repairs, but how many other cottages as far from main roads as this one had electricity and running water? All right, the cesspool had its bad days and the old-fashioned electric wiring would have to be renewed soon and the drive ought to have a load or two of gravel; but the thatch roof was intact and the lawn would be fit for croquet next year.

Roger had only been at the cottage before for a mere half hour, when he had offered Victoria that "lift to town" that had turned out to be her flight. Yet he had made his sweeping judgment, typically never seeing any of the small important things that made one place unlike the next, one person different from another.

No doubt this lack of perception was what made his appalling books sell so well.

"Aren't you going to get the vegetables ready?"

With a start Stephen realized that this question of Roger's was the beginning of the vital stage of Stephen's plan. He licked at his suddenly dry lips.

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"I ought to do the watering first," he said.

"Well, why don't you?"

"Just too damned tired."

"Good God! You can't be too tired to stand squirting things with a hose."

"It's harder work than you think."

"What tripe! Where d'you keep the hose?"

"It's meant to hang in the coalbin, in the cellar. But it's so dark down there that I generally leave it just outside the bin, next to the water outlet in the yard."

Roger drained his whiskey.

"You go and shell peas or whatever," he said. "I'll have the watering done in ten minutes."

"Not if you water the beans at the far end. And they need it, if we can't rely on some rain."

"Nonsense. It's only thirty or forty yards away."

"But you have to come back to turn on the outside water tap."

"Well, you can do that for me before you start the veg," Roger said.

Following him, Stephen thought that it could not have gone more the way he'd wanted it to go than if both of them had been characters in a story he was writing. Well, he had even warned him. He had said it to Roger straight out when he had been insulted once too often: "I could kill you." And Roger had answered, "My dear chap, you haven't got the simple cunning. Look at the murder in that prize book of yours. How did it go? 'Gerald died that night. His head was broken up in the library.' And then back to jaw-jaw. Pathetic."

Roger seized the hose at the nozzle and loped off on his hard bare feet.

"You stick your end of the hose on the tap," Roger shouted over his shoulder. "And you want to get that tap repaired—it drips like the devil."

The watering was completed within Roger's ten-minute limit. Back at the outdoor tap, he called to Stephen in the kitchen scraping new potatoes.

"Where did you say this thing goes? And you'll want to fix the nozzle too. This end of the hose is split and you get filthy wet in no time."

"I know," Stephen said, leaning out of the window. "I'm always meaning to do it."

"Well, get it done then! Now, where does this go?"

"On a hook in the coalbin. You'll need to put the light on."

Stephen watched while Roger groped inside the coalbin for the switch.

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"It's farther in," he called. "Just follow the wire with your hand and you'll find it."

But, of course, Roger did not find the hook. Before his hand got to it, the electric shock had gone thumping through his body and left him dead.

As Stephen waited for the doctor's phone to be answered he quietly congratulated himself. It had all gone perfectly. The outdoor tap that he had let drip faster than it did normally, making the puddle at the coalbin door so wide that Roger was bound to put his bare feet into it. The neat split he had made where the nozzle joined the hose so that anyone using it was sure to get wet hands. And then the last link: the badly frayed electric wire that ran to the coalbin light switch.

Pity he could never write a murder story with that title. It was such a good one.

"Q"

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a *NEW* crime story by

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Loren had read about such people. They were different from the accident prone—they were the suicide-prone. And in a house that was full of death traps, a jinx house, anything could happen . . . A story that will make you feel cold inside . . .

SAUCE FOR THE GOOSE

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

The incident in the garage was the third near-catastrophe in the Amory household, and it put a horrible thought into Loren Amory's head: his darling wife Olivia was trying to kill herself.

Loren had pulled at a plastic clothesline dangling from a high shelf in the garage—his idea had been to tidy up, to coil the clothesline properly—and at that first tug an avalanche of suitcases, an old lawnmower, and a sewing machine weighing God-knows-how-much crashed down on the spot that he barely had time to leap from.

Loren walked slowly back to the house, his heart pounding at his awful discovery. He entered the kitchen and made his way to the stairs. Olivia was in bed, propped against pillows, a magazine in her lap. "What was that terrible noise, dear?"

Loren cleared his throat and settled his black-rimmed glasses more firmly on his nose. "A lot of stuff in the garage. I pulled just a little bit on a clothesline—" He explained what had happened.

She blinked calmly as if to say, "Well, so what? Things like that do happen."

"Have you been up to that shelf for anything lately?"

"Why, no. Why?"

"Because—well, everything was just poised to fall, darling."

"Are you blaming me?" she asked in a small voice.

"Blaming your carelessness? yes. I arranged those suitcases up there and I'd never have put them so they'd fall at a mere touch. And I didn't put the

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sewing machine on top of the heap. Now, I'm not saying—"

"Blaming my carelessness," she repeated, affronted.

He knelt quickly beside the bed. "Darling, let's not hide things any more. Last week there was the carpet sweeper on the cellar stairs. And that ladder! You were going to climb it to knock down that wasps' nest!—What I'm getting at, darling, is that you *want* something to happen to you, whether you realize it or not. You've got to be more careful, Olivia.—Oh, darling, please don't cry. I'm trying to help you. I'm not criticizing."

"I know, Loren. You're good. But my life—it doesn't seem worth living any more, I suppose. I don't mean I'm *trying* to end my life, but—"

"You're still thinking—of Stephen?" Loren hated the name and hated saying it.

She took her hands down from her pinkened eyes. "You made me promise you not to think of him, so I haven't. I swear it, Loren."

"Good, darling. That's my little girl." He took her hands in his. "What do you say to a cruise soon? Maybe in February? Myers is coming back from the coast and he can take over for me for a couple of weeks. What about Haiti or Bermuda?"

She seemed to think about it for a moment, but at last shook her head and said she knew he was only doing it for her, not because he really wanted to go. Loren remonstrated briefly, then gave it up. If Olivia didn't take to an idea at once, she never took to it. There had been one triumph—his convincing her that it made sense not to see Stephen Castle for a period of three months.

Olivia had met Stephen Castle at a party given by one of Loren's colleagues on the Stock Exchange. Stephen was 35, which was ten years younger than Loren and one year older than Olivia, and Stephen was an actor. Loren had no idea how Toohey, their host that evening, had met him, or why he had invited him to a party at which every other man was either in banking or on the Exchange; but there he'd been, like an evil alien spirit, and he'd concentrated on Olivia the entire evening, and she'd responded with her charming smiles that had captured Loren in a single evening eight years ago.

Afterward, when they were driving back to Old Greenwich, Olivia had said, "It's such fun to talk to somebody who's not in the stock market for a change! He told me he's rehearsing in a play now, 'The

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Frequent Guest.' We've got to see it, Loren."

They saw it. Stephen Castle was on for perhaps five minutes in Act One. They visited Stephen backstage, and Olivia invited him to a cocktail party they were giving the following weekend. He came, and spent that night in their guest room. In the next weeks Olivia drove her car into New York at least twice a week on shopping expeditions, but she made no secret of the fact she saw Stephen for lunch on those days and sometimes for cocktails too. At last she told Loren she was in love with Stephen and wanted a divorce.

Loren was speechless at first, even inclined to grant her a divorce by way of being sportsmanlike; but 48 hours after her announcement he came to what he considered his senses. By that time he had measured himself against his rival—not merely physically (Loren did not come off so well there, being no taller than Olivia, with a receding hairline and a small paunch) but morally and financially as well. In the last two categories he had it all over Stephen Castle, and modestly he pointed this out to Olivia.

"I'd never marry a man for his money," she retorted.

"I didn't mean you married me for my money, dear. I just happened to have it. But what's Stephen Castle ever going to have? Nothing much, from what I can see of his acting. You're used to more than he can give you. And you've known him only six weeks. How can you be sure his love for you is going to last?"

That last thought made Olivia pause. She said she would see Stephen just once more—"to talk it over." She drove to New York one morning and did not return until midnight. It was a Sunday, when Stephen had no performance. Loren sat up waiting for her. In tears Olivia told him that she and Stephen had come to an understanding. They would not see each other for a month, and if at the end of that time they did not feel the same way about each other, they would agree to forget the whole thing.

"But of course you'll feel the same," Loren said. "What's a month in the life of an adult? If you'd try it for three months—"

She looked at him through tears. "Three months?"

"Against the eight years we've been married? Is that unfair? Our marriage deserves at least a three-month chance, too doesn't it?"

"All right, it's a bargain. Three months. I'll call Stephen

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tomorrow and tell him. We won't see each other or telephone for three months."

From that day Olivia had gone into a decline. She lost interest in gardening, in her bridge club, even in clothes. Her appetite fell off, though she did not lose much weight, perhaps because she was proportionately inactive. They had never had a servant. Olivia took pride in the fact that she had been a working girl, a saleswoman in the gift department of a large store in Manhattan, when Loren met her. She liked to say that she knew how to do things for herself. The big house in Old Greenwich was enough to keep any woman busy, though Loren had bought every conceivable labor-saving device. They also had a walk-in deep freeze, the size of a large closet, in the basement, so that their marketing was done less often than usual, and all food was delivered, anyway. Now that Olivia seemed low in energy, Loren suggested getting a maid, but Olivia refused.

Seven weeks went by, and Olivia kept her word about not seeing Stephen. But she was obviously so depressed, so ready to burst into tears, that Loren lived constantly on the brink of weakening and telling her that if she loved Stephen that much, she had a right to see him. Perhaps, Loren thought, Stephen Castle was feeling the same way, also counting off the weeks until he could see Olivia again. If so, Loren had already lost.

But it was hard for Loren to give Stephen credit for feeling anything. He was a lanky, rather stupid chap with oat-colored hair, and Loren had never seen him without a sickly smile on his mouth—as if he were a human billboard of himself, perpetually displaying what he must have thought was his most flattering expression.

Loren, a bachelor until at 37 he married Olivia, often sighed in dismay at the ways of women. For instance, Olivia: if he had felt so strongly about another woman, he would have set about promptly to extricate himself from his marriage. But here was Olivia hanging on, in a way. What did she expect to gain from it, he wondered. Did she think, or hope, that her infatuation for Stephen might disappear? Or did she want to spite Loren and prove that it wouldn't? Or did she know unconsciously that her love for Stephen Castle was all fantasy, and that her present depression represented to her and to Loren a fitting period of mourning for a love she didn't have the courage to go out and take?

But the Saturday of the

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garage incident made Loren doubt that Olivia was indulging in fantasy. He did not want to admit that Olivia was attempting to take her own life, but logic compelled him to. He had read about such people. They were different from the accident-prone, who might live to die a natural death, whatever that was. The others were the suicide-prone, and into this category he was sure Olivia fell.

A perfect example was the ladder episode. Olivia had been on the fourth or fifth rung when Loren noticed the crack in the left side of the ladder, and she had been quite unconcerned, even when he pointed it out to her. If it hadn't been for her saying she suddenly felt a little dizzy looking up at the wasps' nest, he never would have started to do the chore himself, and therefore wouldn't have seen the crack.

Loren noticed in the newspaper that Stephen's play was closing, and it seemed to him that Olivia's gloom deepened. Now there were dark circles under her eyes. She claimed she could not fall asleep before dawn.

"Call him if you want to, darling," Loren finally said. "See him once again and find out if you both—"

"No, I made a promise to you. Three months, Loren. I'll keep my promise," she said with a trembling lip.

Loren turned away from her, wretched and hating himself.

Olivia grew physically weaker. Once she stumbled coming down the stairs and barely caught herself on the banister. Loren suggested, not for the first time, that she see a doctor, but she refused to.

"The three months are nearly up, dear. I'll survive them," she said, smiling sadly.

It was true. Only two more weeks remained until March 15th, the three months' deadline. The Ides of March, Loren realized for the first time. A most ominous coincidence.

On Sunday afternoon Loren was looking over some office reports in his study when he heard a long scream, followed by a clattering crash. In an instant he was on his feet and running. It had come from the cellar, he thought, and if so, he knew what had happened. That damned carpet sweeper again!

"Olivia?"

From the dark cellar he heard a groan. Loren plunged down the steps. There was a little whirr of wheels, his feet flew up in front of him, and in the few seconds before his head smashed against the cement floor he understood everything: Olivia had not fallen down the

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cellar steps, she had only lured him here; all this time she had been trying to kill *him*—and all for Stephen Castle.

"I was upstairs in bed reading," Olivia told the police, her hands shaking as she clutched her dressing gown around her. "I heard a terrible crash and then—I came down—" She gestured helplessly toward Loren's dead body.

The police took down what she told them and commiserated with her. People ought to be more careful, they said, about things like carpet sweepers on dark stairways. There were fatalities like this every day in the United States. Then the body was taken away, and on Tuesday Loren Amory was buried.

Olivia rang Stephen on Wednesday. She had been telephoning him every day except Saturdays and Sundays, but she had not rung him since the previous Friday. They had agreed that any weekday she did not call him at his apartment at 11:00 A.M. would be a signal that their mission had been accomplished. Also, Loren Amory had got quite a lot of space on the obituary page Monday. He had left nearly a million dollars to his widow, and houses in Florida, Connecticut, and Maine.

"Dearest! You look so tired!" were Stephen's first words to her when they met in an out-of-the-way bar in New York on Wednesday.

"Nonsense! It's all make-up," Olivia said gaily. "And you an actor!" She laughed. "I have to look properly gloomy for my neighbors, you know. And I'm never sure when I'll run into someone I know in New York."

Stephen looked around him nervously, then said with his habitual smile, "Darling Olivia, how soon can we be together?"

"Very soon," she said promptly. "Not up at the house, of course, but remember we talked about a cruise? Maybe Trinidad? I've got the money with me. I want you to buy the tickets."

They took separate staterooms, and the local Connecticut paper, without a hint of suspicion, reported that Mrs. Amory's voyage was for reasons of health.

Back in the United States in April, suntanned and looking much improved, Olivia confessed to her friends that she had met someone she was "interested in." Her friends assured her that was normal, and that she shouldn't be alone for the rest of her life. The curious thing was that when Olivia invited Stephen to a dinner party at her house, none

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of her friends remembered him, though several had met him at that cocktail party a few months before. Stephen was much more sure of himself now, and he behaved like an angel, Olivia thought.

In August they were married. Stephen had been getting nibbles in the way of work, but nothing materialized. Olivia told him not to worry, that things would surely pick up after the summer. Stephen did not seem to worry very much, though he protested he ought to work, and said if necessary he would try for some television parts. He developed an interest in gardening, planted some young blue spruces, and generally made the place look alive again.

Olivia was delighted that Stephen liked the house, because she did. Neither of them ever referred to the cellar stairs, but they had a light switch put at the top landing, so that a similar thing could not occur again. Also, the carpet sweeper was kept in its proper place, in the broom closet in the kitchen.

They entertained more often than Olivia and Loren had done. Stephen had many friends in New York, and Olivia found them amusing. But Stephen, Olivia thought, was drinking just a little too much. At one party, when they were all out on the terrace, Stephen nearly fell over the parapet. Two of the guests had to grab him.

"Better watch out for yourself in this house, Steve," said Parker Barnes, an actor friend of Stephen's. "It just might be jinxed."

"What d'ya mean?" Stephen asked. "I don't believe that for a minute. I may be an actor, but I haven't got a single superstition."

"Oh, so you're an actor, Mr. Castle!" a woman's voice said out of the darkness.

After the guests had gone, Stephen asked Olivia to come out again on the terrace.

"Maybe the air'll clear my head," Stephen said, smiling. "Sorry I was tipsy tonight.—There's old Orion. See him?" He put his arm around Olivia and drew her close. "Brightest constellation in the heavens."

"You're hurting me, Stephen! Not so—" Then she screamed and squirmed, fighting for her life.

"Damn you!" Stephen gasped, astounded at her strength.

She had twisted away from him and was standing near the bedroom door, facing him now. "You were going to push me over, weren't you?"

"No! Good God, Olivia!—I lost my balance, that's all. I

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thought I was going over myself!"

"That's a fine thing to do, then, hold onto a woman and pull her over too."

"I didn't realize. I'm drunk, darling. And I'm sorry."

They lay as usual in the same bed that night, but both of them were only pretending sleep. Until, for Olivia at least, just as she had used to tell Loren, sleep came around dawn.

The next day, casually and surreptitiously, each of them looked over the house from attic to cellar—Olivia with a view to protecting herself from possible death traps, Stephen with a view to setting them. He had already decided that the cellar steps offered the best possibility, in spite of the duplication, because he thought no one would believe anyone would dare to use the same means—if the intention was murder.

Olivia happened to be thinking the same thing.

The cellar steps had never before been so free of impediments or so well lighted. Neither of them took the initiative to turn the light out at night. Outwardly each professed love and faith in the other.

"I'm sorry I ever said such a thing to you, Stephen," she whispered in his ear as she embraced him. "I was afraid on the terrace that night, that's all. When you said, 'Damn you'—"

"I know, angel. You *couldn't* have thought I meant to hurt you. I said 'Damn you' just because you were there, and I thought I might be pulling you over."

They talked about another cruise. They wanted to go to Europe next spring. But at meals they cautiously tasted every item of food before beginning to eat.

How could *I* have done anything to the food, Stephen thought to himself, since you never leave the kitchen while you're cooking it.

And Olivia: I don't put anything past you. There's only one direction you seem to be bright in, Stephen.

Her humiliation in having lost a lover was hidden by a dark resentment. She realized she had been victimized. The last bit of Stephen's charm had vanished. Yet now, Olivia thought, he was doing the best job of acting in his life—and a twenty-four-hour-a-day acting job at that. She congratulated herself that it did not fool her, and she weighed one plan against another, knowing that this "accident" had to be even more convincing than the one that had freed her from Loren.

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Stephen realized he was not in quite so awkward a position. Everyone who knew him and Olivia, even slightly, thought he adored her. An accident would be assumed to be just that, an accident, if he said so. He was now toying with the idea of the closet-sized deep freeze in the cellar. There was no inside handle on the door, and once in a while Olivia went into the farthest corner of the deep freeze to get steaks or frozen asparagus. But would she dare to go into it, now that her suspicions were aroused, if he happened to be in the cellar at the same time? He doubted it.

While Olivia was breakfasting in bed one morning—she had taken to her own bedroom again, and Stephen brought her breakfast as Loren had always done—Stephen experimented with the door of the deep freeze. If it so much as touched a solid object in swinging open, he discovered, it would slowly but surely swing shut on its rebound. There was no solid object near the door now, and on the contrary the door was intended to be swung fully open, so that a catch on the outside of the door would lock in a grip set in the wall for just that purpose, and thus keep the door open. Olivia, he had noticed, always swung the door wide when she went in, and it latched onto the wall automatically. But if he put something in its way, even the corner of the box of kindling wood, the door would strike it and swing shut again, before Olivia had time to realize what had happened.

However, that particular moment did not seem the right one to put the kindling box in position, so Stephen did not set his trap. Olivia had said something about their going out to a restaurant tonight. She would not be taking anything out to thaw today.

They took a little walk at three in the afternoon—through the woods behind the house, then back home again—and they almost started holding hands, in a mutually distasteful and insulting pretense of affection; but their fingers only brushed and separated.

"A cup of tea would taste good, wouldn't it, darling?" said Olivia.

"Um-m." He smiled. Poison in the tea? Poison in the cookies? She'd made them herself that morning.

He remembered how they had plotted Loren's sad demise—her tender whispers of murder over their luncheons, her infinite patience as the weeks went by and plan after plan failed. It was he who had suggested the carpet sweeper on

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the cellar steps and the lure of a scream from her. What could *her* bird-brain ever plan?

Shortly after their tea—everything had tasted fine—Stephen strolled out of the living room as if with no special purpose. He felt compelled to try out the kindling box again to see if it could really be depended on. He felt inspired, too, to set the trap now and leave it. The light at the head of the cellar stairs was on. He went carefully down the steps.

He listened for a moment to see if Olivia was possibly following him. Then he pulled the kindling box into position, not parallel to the front of the deep freeze, of course, but a little to one side, as if someone had dragged it out of the shadow to see into it better and left it there. He opened the deep-freeze door with exactly the speed and force Olivia might use, flinging the door from him as he stepped in with one foot, his right hand outstretched to catch the door on the rebound. But the foot that bore his weight slid several inches forward just as the door bumped against the kindling box.

Stephen was down on his right knee, his left leg straight out in front of him, and behind him the door shut. He got to his feet instantly and faced the closed door wide-eyed. It was dark, and he groped for the auxiliary switch to the left of the door, which put a light on at the back of the deep freeze.

How had it happened? The damned glaze of frost on the floor! But it wasn't only the frost, he saw. What he had slipped on was a little piece of suet that he now saw in the middle of the floor, at the end of the greasy streak his slide had made.

Stephen stared at the suet neutrally, blankly, for an instant, then faced the door again, pushed it, felt along its firm rubber-sealed crack. He could call Olivia, of course. Eventually she'd hear him, or at least *miss* him, before he had time to freeze. She'd come down to the cellar, and she'd be able to hear him there even if she couldn't hear him in the living room. Then she'd open the door, of course.

He smiled weakly, and tried to convince himself she *would* open the door.

"Olivia?—*Olivia!* I'm down in the *cellar!*"

It was nearly a half hour later when Olivia called to Stephen to ask him which restaurant he preferred, a matter that would influence what she wore. She looked for him in his bedroom, in the

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library, on the terrace, and finally called out the front door, thinking he might be somewhere on the lawn.

At last she tried the cellar.

By this time, hunched in his tweed jacket, his arms crossed, Stephen was walking up and down in the deep freeze, giving out distress signals at intervals of thirty seconds and using the rest of his breath to blow into his shirt in an effort to warm himself. Olivia was just about to leave the cellar when she heard her name called faintly.

"Stephen?—Stephen, where are you?"

"In the deep freeze!" he called as loudly as he could.

Olivia looked at the deep freeze with an incredulous smile.

"Open it, can't you? I'm in the *deep freeze!*" came his muffled voice.

Olivia threw her head back and laughed, not even caring if Stephen heard her. Then still laughing so hard that she had to bend over, she climbed the cellar stairs.

What amused her was that she had thought of the deep freeze as a fine place to dispose of Stephen, but she hadn't worked out how to get him into it. His being there now, she realized, was owing to some funny accident—maybe he'd been trying to set a trap for her. It was all too comical. And lucky!

Or maybe, she thought cagily, his intention even now was to trick her into opening the deep-freeze door, then to yank her inside and close the door on her. She was certainly not going to let *that* happen!

Olivia took her car and drove nearly twenty miles northward, had a sandwich at a roadside café, then went to a movie. When she got home at midnight she found she had not the courage to call "Stephen" to the deep freeze, or even to go down to the cellar. She wasn't sure he'd be dead by now, and even if he were silent it might mean he was only pretending to be dead or unconscious.

But tomorrow, she thought, there wouldn't be any doubt he'd be dead. The very lack of air, for one thing, ought to finish him by that time.

She went to bed and assured herself a night's sleep with a light sedative. She would have a strenuous day tomorrow. Her story of the mild quarrel with Stephen—over which restaurant they'd go to, nothing more—and his storming out of the living room to take a walk, she thought, would have to be very convincing.

At ten the next morning, after orange juice and coffee, Olivia felt ready for her role of

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the horrified, grief-stricken widow. After all, she told herself, she had practised the role—it would be the second time she had played the part. She decided to face the police in her dressing gown, as before.

To be quite natural about the whole thing she went down to the cellar to make the "discovery" before she called the police.

"Stephen? Stephen?" she called out with confidence.

No answer.

She opened the deep freeze with apprehension, gasped at the curled-up, frost-covered figure on the floor, then walked the few feet toward him—aware that her footprints on the floor would be visible to corroborate her story that she had come in to try to revive Stephen.

Ka-*bloom* went the door—as if someone standing outside had given it a good hard push.

Now Olivia gasped in earnest, and her mouth stayed open. She'd flung the door wide. It should have latched onto the outside wall. "Hello! Is anybody out there? Open this door, please! At once!"

But she knew there was no one out there. It was just some damnable accident. Maybe an accident that Stephen had arranged.

She looked at his face. His eyes were open, and on his white lips was his familiar little smile, triumphant now, and utterly nasty. Olivia did not look at him again. She drew her flimsy dressing gown as closely about her as she could and began to yell.

"Help! Someone!—*police!*"

She kept it up for what seemed like hours, until she grew hoarse and until she did not really feel very cold any more, only a little sleepy.

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a *NEW* John Jericho story by

HUGH PENTECOST

Portrait of John Jericho: six feet four, 240 pounds, all muscle, red hair and a flaming red beard and mustache; crusader for decency and fairplay, champion of the underdog, fighter against violence who, when necessary, can use the adversary's own weapons; painter who puts on canvas his outrage at man's inhumanity to man . . .

Here is Jericho's newest adventure in crime and detection—about donkey's ears and the grimmest joke of all . . .

JERICHO AND THE TWO WAYS TO DIE

by HUGH PENTECOST

The place probably had a name, Jericho thought, like Lookout Point or High View or something equally imaginative. The road wound around the side of the mountain, with vertical cliffs on one side and a drop into space on the other. From this particular point there was an incredibly beautiful view of a wide valley below: farming country with fenced-in fields that made it look like a nonsymmetrical checkerboard; cattle looking like tiny toys in the distance and grazing languidly. And color! Autumn glory was at its peak, gold and red and russet brown and the dark green of pines and fir trees.

Jericho had discovered this spot a few days ago and his painter's eye had been caught and held. He'd taken a room in a motel in the nearby town of Plainville and come here each of the last three days with his easel and painting gear.

The town fathers of Plainville had obviously been aware of all this magnificence. The

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two-lane road had been widened so that visitors in cars could pull out to the very edge of the drop, guarded by a steel-cable fence, park, and take in God's handiwork at their leisure. Jericho had chosen a spot above the road, above the lookout point, to do his painting. He had found a place to pull his red Mercedes off the road, had scrambled up the bank with his equipment, and set himself up for the day. Unless someone was searching for his car or craning his neck to look straight up, his presence would remain unknown.

He was sitting with his back propped against a huge boulder, filling a black curve-stemmed pipe from an oilskin pouch, when he first saw the small sports car with the girl at the wheel. She was driving up from the town, hugging the inside of the road. The car's top was down and he was attracted by the bright blonde hair of the driver that blew around her face, wondering idly if the color was real or if it came out of a bottle. While he watched, the girl stopped the car directly below him and got out. A very short skirt and very nice legs, he thought, and an exquisite figure. She was wearing a pair of amber-tinted granny glasses.

She walked across the road to the lookout area, reached the steel cable of the fence, and instead of looking out at the view she leaned forward and looked down. Some people are fascinated by dizzying heights. She stood there for a full minute, gazing down. Then she came back to the car, got in, and started the motor. She started, faster than was good for the motor or tires, swung the wheel to the left, and aimed directly at the spot where she'd been standing.

Jericho pushed himself up on his haunches and his mouth opened to shout when she came to a sudden skidding stop, the front bumper of the sports car hard against the steel-cable fence.

"Idiot!" Jericho said out loud, standing up.

The girl got out of the car and went to the fence—staring down again. Slowly she came back and got into the car. She backed across the road, almost in her own tracks, and stopped where she had first parked. Then she started up again, with a spray of gravel from the rear tires, and once more headed straight for the fence. And once again she stopped, just in time.

Jericho went sliding down the bank, braking with his heels. He reached the car and stood gripping the door on the passenger's side, towering over the girl. He was a giant of a

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man, standing six feet four and weighing about 240, all muscle. He had flaming red hair and a buccaneer's red beard and mustache.

"There are two ways to die," he said in a conversational tone. "One is to give up and kill yourself; the other is to go down fighting whatever it is that has you up a tree." He smiled. "The second way, there's a chance you won't have to die at all."

The eyes behind the granny glasses were wide, frightened. He couldn't tell their color—they were shielded by the amber lenses. The mouth was wide, drawn down at the corners. The face was classic: high cheekbones, straight nose, eyes set nicely apart. She would have been beautiful if something like terror hadn't contorted the features. Her hands gripped the wheel of the car so tightly her knuckles were white knobs.

"Oh, God!" she said in a strangled whisper.

Jericho opened the car door and got in beside her. "This isn't a very heavy car," he said. "I don't know if you could plow through that steel cable or not." He took his pipe out of his pocket and held his lighter to it. "Care to talk about it?"

Her head was turned away toward her target at the lookout point. "You're John Jericho, the artist, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"Plainville is a small town. You're a celebrity. Word gets around." Her voice was low and husky. She was fighting for control.

"And you are Miss—?"

"Mrs. Virgil Clarke," she said. She turned to him. "You've heard of my husband?"

He looked at her ringless fingers. "Famous trial lawyer," he said. "You live in Plainville?"

"We have a home here, an apartment in New York, an island in the West Indies."

"Nobody can say that crime does not pay," Jericho said. Fragments of memory were falling into place. Virgil Clarke was endlessly in the headlines. His Lincolnesque face was as familiar as a movie star's. He was the Clarence Darrow of the 1970s, the hero of people with lost causes. He must be, Jericho thought, 60 years old, at least twice the age of the girl who sat gripping the wheel of the sports car.

Memory again: a girl charged with murder; a brilliant defense; an acquittal; a headline romance and marriage. It was the first marriage for the noted lawyer; the bride was a widow accused and acquitted of having

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murdered her husband.

"You've remembered," she said.

He nodded, his strong white teeth clamped on the stem of his pipe. "Care to tell me why?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Why you were contemplating a plunge into oblivion?"

She looked at him, forcing a smile. "You thought I meant to—?"

"Didn't you?"

"I—I'm not a very good driver," she said. "I wanted to turn around. I couldn't seem to figure out how to—how to do it."

"Have it your way," Jericho said. "It's really none of my business." He opened the car door, swung his long legs out, and stood looking down at her. "At least you've had a chance to think about it twice." His smile was mirthless. "Pull back, cut your wheels right, back up some more, then head for—wherever you're headed for, Mrs. Clarke."

About a hundred yards from Jericho's motel, down the main street of Plainville, was a delightful small country inn. Jericho had tried to get a room there when he decided to stay over but the inn was full. He had discovered, however, that they had an excellent kitchen.

He dined there the evening of the day he encountered the girl at Lookout Point. He had a dry martini, a shrimp cocktail, a very good brook trout helped along by a small white wine, a delicious mixed green salad. He was debating a homemade lemon meringue pie when the boy from the motel came to his table.

"Mrs. Clarke left a note for you, sir," he said. "I knew you were having dinner here."

Jericho opened the pale-blue envelope.

"Dear Mr. Jericho:

I tried to reach you on the phone without any luck. We are having an open house party tonight and my husband and I would be delighted to have you join us and our guests at any time after eight o'clock.

Janice Clarke.

P.S. I hope you won't mind being lionized. Incidentally, anyone can tell you where we live."

People who behave strangely and without explanation were irresistible to Jericho. He went back to the motel, changed into slacks, a blue blazer, and a yellow turtlenecked sweater-shirt. At about 8:30 he drove through the big stone gates that guarded the entrance to the Clarke estate. In the moonlight he saw the old Colonial house ideally situated on a hillside,

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with its magnificent lawns, shrubbery, and gardens. The house was brilliantly lighted and as he came close he saw this was not a small party. There were more than thirty cars parked along the side of the wide circular driveway.

The sound of music and laughter drifted toward Jericho as he approached the front door. The music was loud—rock rhythm. He was admitted by a uniformed maid and found himself in an enormous living room which seemed to occupy most of the ground floor of the house. All the furniture had been pushed to the sides of the room and the floor space was crowded with jumping, gyrating couples. The music came from a bearded trio in a far corner—two electric guitars and drums. There was a bar, loaded with every conceivable kind of liquor. There were two bartenders in scarlet shirts and leather vests. The dancing couples wore every conceivable kind of mod dress.

Jericho, looking around for his hostess, spotted his host standing at the far end of the room, his back to a blazing fire in a huge fieldstone fireplace. Virgil Clarke was unmistakable, tall, angular, with a lock of hair drooping over his broad forehead. He looked wildly out of place in this gathering in his dark business suit, button-down white shirt, and black knitted tie. His attention was focused on his wife who was dancing with a long-haired, not unhandsome young fellow wearing a batik shirt that hung loose outside his trousers. Virgil Clarke's face looked carved out of rock. What he was seeing obviously gave him no pleasure.

Watching the dancers, Jericho thought how things had changed in the last 20 years. When you danced, back then, the music was soft and you held your girl close. Now the music was deafening and the couples danced apart from each other, not touching, each performing a kind of individual war dance.

Jericho's attention was diverted by a luscious blonde girl, not more than 20, he thought. She was wearing a startling peek-a-boo dress that revealed almost everything of her gloriously suntanned young body.

"Jericho!" There was delight in the young voice and she was instantly clinging to his arm. "Jan is a genius! How did she manage to get you here? I'm Dana Williams, by the way. My father owns two of your paintings."

"Bless your father. And Mrs. Clarke didn't have to be a genius to get me here. She invited me and I came."

"We've been trying to guess

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how to meet you for the last three days without barging up and brazenly thrusting ourselves on you. How did Jan manage it?"

"She brazenly thrust herself at me," Jericho said, "which is the best and quickest way."

"Does she know you're here? She'll be wild when she sees I've glommed onto you first. Oh, there she is, dancing with Roger."

"Who is Roger?"

"Roger Newfield. He's one of the young lawyers who works in Virgil's office. You'd better have a drink. You're way behind everyone here."

They fought their way around the edge of the dancing throng to the bar. So far Janice hadn't noticed him. She was totally concentrated on the young man opposite whom her body twisted and turned.

Jericho ordered a Jack Daniels on the rocks and Dana a vodka martini. Watching the dancers again, Jericho found himself puzzled. They were all young. There seemed no one here even approaching Virgil Clarke's generation. Jericho suspected that he, at 40, came closest to his host in years. It was odd, he thought, that in the home of a famous man there seemed to be no other famous people, no sycophants, no hangers-on, no yes-men. Clarke, moving away from the fireplace as Jericho watched, seemed out of place in his own home.

"Shall we dance, Jericho?" Dana asked, smiling at him over the rim of her glass.

"It reveals my antiquity," he said, "but I don't—can't—do this modern stuff."

"You want to hold me close we can go out on the terrace," the girl said.

"To dance?"

"No, silly, to hold me close. I like older men, Jericho. Ask and ye shall receive."

"You ought to have your backside paddled," Jericho said.

"Oh, please! I'd love that!"

Before he could reply to that gambit Jericho felt a hand on his arm. He turned to face the uniformed maid.

"Mr. Clarke hopes you will join him in his study for a moment, sir," she said.

"A summons from the All Highest," Dana said. "Maybe he wants to buy a painting, maestro. I'll be waiting on the terrace. You be thinking about what you want to ask me to do."

"I'll be thinking," Jericho said, thinking about a number of ungallant suggestions. He liked to make his own passes.

The maid led him away from the bedlam of the dancers and down a short corridor to an oak door. She knocked and a deep

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voice invited them in. Virgil Clarke was standing by a far window and looking out over the moonlit lawn.

"Mr. Jericho," he said, as he turned. "Thank you, Millicent."

The maid left, closing the door behind her. The jumping rock rhythms were suddenly silenced. Jericho realized that this room was soundproofed. "Good evening, sir," he said.

At close quarters Clarke was even more impressive. The deep lines at the corners of his mouth were lines of character. The mouth was firm and uncompromising without suggesting vanity or inflexibility. The eyes were deep and dark and somehow tragic, as if he couldn't shake the memory of a thousand violences. Fighting against violence had been his lifework.

"We've never met, Mr. Jericho, but I have been an admirer of yours for some years."

Jericho had noticed the absence of any art in the house. "I hadn't thought of you as being interested in painting, sir."

"I'm not," Clarke said. "Never had a chance to develop a taste for it. I've never seen one of your paintings to know it. I've admired you since the trial of the Faxon brothers."

Jericho frowned. A good part of his own life had been devoted to traveling to the scenes of violence and trying to put on canvas his outrage at man's inhumanity to man. The Faxon brothers had murdered two civil-rights demonstrators. Jericho had been a witness for the prosecution.

"I don't recall your being connected with the case, sir," he said.

"I wasn't, except as a spectator," Clarke said. "I was interested in the defense counsel. I thought of asking him to become a partner in my firm. You broke his back in that case. You stood up under a damn good cross-examination and you broke his back."

"I told the truth."

"You convinced the jury it was the truth."

"It was. Did you hire your man?"

"I did not," Clarke said. "He committed the cardinal sin of getting to admire you while trying to break you down. I would have beaten you, I think, because I wouldn't have allowed myself that luxury. But as a spectator I admired you. There is a good honest man, I told myself. Honest and strong."

"A nice compliment," Jericho said, wondering.

Clarke gestured toward a comfortable armchair. "Can I

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get you a drink? I noticed you were drinking Jack Daniels out there." He had noticed from across the room. "I'll join you in fruit juice, if you don't mind. I have hours of work ahead of me tonight."

"Lucky your study is soundproofed," Jericho said, smiling. "Thanks. Jack Daniels on the rocks would be fine."

Clarke went to a small sideboard, made Jericho's drink, and poured himself some cranberry juice. He handed Jericho his glass and said, "Why, if I may seem to be impertinent, are you here?"

"Because I was asked," Jericho said.

"What I would like," Clarke said, "is that you, without asking for any explanation, leave this room, go out to your car, and return to your lodgings."

"If you, my host, ask me to leave I will," Jericho said, "but I damn well want to know why. I'm entitled to that, I think."

"I am not your host," Clarke said. "Janice evidently invited you here."

"She did."

"Then go," Clarke said, his voice raised. "You have been asked here to be used. Janice never does anything without a purpose. If you imagine it is your maleness that's attracted her, forget it. Her tastes lie in areas which I suspect would bore you. She has some other reason. I would dislike seeing you used, Mr. Jericho."

"That's a rather extraordinary thing for you to say to a stranger about your wife," Jericho said.

"If you were to say that in front of Janice or that little tramp Dana, you would promptly be labeled a square," Clarke said. His face looked haggard, and there was a kind of frightening bitterness in his voice. Jericho felt acute embarrassment. The man was revealing some kind of deep unhealed wound without hinting how it had been inflicted. Perhaps it was just age, the inexorable process of growing old surrounded by a desirable young wife and her young friends.

But there had been Lookout Point and Janice Clarke's tentative exercise in suicide.

"Perhaps I should tell you how I came to meet your wife, Mr. Clarke," Jericho said. So he told the lawyer about Lookout Point and the little car and the frightened girl and the preparations to die which he had been lucky enough to forestall.

Clarke listened attentively, and when Jericho finished, the lawyer said, "I saved her once and I have been laughed at ever since—betrayed and laughed at. And now, if you don't leave,

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you will be betrayed and laughed at too. You have already sprouted donkey's ears, Jericho. You have been deliberately made to feel that you were Sir Galahad saving the desperate princess. The next step will be some grotesque practical joke that will have them all laughing at you."

"Why?" Jericho asked.

"It is their prime pleasure," Clarke said.

"Why me?" Jericho asked.

"Because you are a famous man. Because you are a crusader for decency and fairplay—causes that seem antiquated to them. Because you are over thirty and your generation must be discredited. Because it will delight them to show you up as a romantic square, to show you up publicly."

Jericho looked at his pipe which rested, cold, in the palm of his hand. "Your wife must be reaching that thirty deadline," he said.

"Which is why she will go to any lengths to show that she is still part of that young world—go to any outrageous lengths, I tell you!"

Jericho looked at the haggard face. "Why do you put up with it?"

"I was once Sir Galahad," Clarke said. "I defended her against a murder charge. I set her free. I was bewitched by her youth, her helplessness, and I wanted to protect her forever. I persuaded her to marry me. And then—then I was laughed at because I couldn't begin to satisfy her needs. Everyone out there knows that, in her terms, I am an inadequate lover. I have no taste for orgies, which makes me a square."

"Why haven't you walked out on her? Your values are sound and you know it. You are miserable, so why do you put up with it?"

"Because there is a bigger joke," Clarke said. "I defended her in court because I believed in her innocence."

Jericho drew a deep breath. "Are you telling me—?"

"That she was guilty," Clarke said, grinding out the words. "I, the Great Defender, was suckered into believing in her innocence. I married her. I showered her with luxuries. I was fooled, blinded."

"But if that's so, she must be ready to do anything you ask. She can't risk your displeasure."

"Double jeopardy," the lawyer said. "There is no new evidence. She can't be tried again. I can bear to be laughed at for my personal inadequacies but there is one area where I can't face public laughter."

"Your legal reputation?"

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"It's all I have," Clarke said.

The study door burst open and Janice Clarke swept into the room. "Jericho!" she cried out. "I've been looking for you everywhere! How selfish of you to keep our celebrity to yourself, Virgil." She appropriated Jericho, her arm linked in his. "It's my turn now."

Jericho glanced at the lawyer. Virgil Clarke had turned away. He had revealed himself and issued his warning. Now it appeared he couldn't bear to confront his wife.

Jericho was led out into the hall and instantly assailed by the cacophony of the rock group and the shouting, laughing dancers.

"Take me for a ride in your car," Janice Clarke said. "I need to get away from this for a bit." She looked up at him with a wan smile. "It's been something of a day."

Either Clarke was a vicious liar or this girl deserved an Oscar for her acting talent, Jericho thought. He had a deep instinct for the fake, the phony, but the instinct was blurred at the moment. Someone had lied to him, he knew—either the lawyer in his study tonight or the girl with her performance at Lookout Point this afternoon.

They walked across the lawn to where the red Mercedes was parked. She was hanging onto his arm as though terrified of being separated from him. He helped her into the car and walked around to the other side.

"Where to?" he asked as he settled behind the wheel.

"Anywhere. Just away from here for a while."

"Won't your boy friend miss you?"

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. "Virgil's been talking to you! Who is alleged to be my boy friend tonight?"

"My own guess," Jericho said. "The young man you were dancing with when I came in."

"Roger Newfield?" She laughed, a harsh little sound. "Roger is a lawyer on Virgil's staff. He's one of the family. He worships Virgil, not me."

Jericho started the motor and drove the car slowly down the drive and out through the stone gates. He turned right for no particular reason. He wondered if this was part of the "practical joke" that Virgil Clarke had warned him about. Jericho wasn't afraid of laughter, so there was no reason for him to feel uneasy. Yet he did feel uneasy.

"You're too kind to ask me what you want to know," Janice said after a bit.

"Oh?"

"About Lookout Point to-

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day. What could have—could have driven me to think—of—of what I was thinking."

Jericho felt the small hairs rising on the back of his neck. "I *was* wondering," he said, looking straight ahead into the cone of light from the car.

"Virgil saved my life, you know," she said, "I owed him everything. I loved him for what he had done for me. I was deeply moved and deliriously happy when he asked me to marry him. I would have married him even if I hadn't loved him. I owed him anything he asked."

"And he's given you a great deal—every luxury you could desire. But not love?"

"Have you never been astonished, Jericho, when the curtains are lifted and you can see inside the house? Virgil, so calm, so cool, so brilliant when he is onstage, turned out to be a sadistic monster in his private world. It is beyond endurance, and yet I owe him my life. Sometimes—and today was one of those times—it seemed I couldn't stand it any longer. If it hadn't been for you—"

Jericho's foot was on the brake. "I think we'd better go back," he said.

"Oh, not yet!" She glanced at her little diamond-studded wrist watch.

"Now," Jericho said, and swung the car in a U-turn.

"Oh, please, Jericho! Let me have a little time to get hold of myself."

The car leaped forward, back toward the stone gates. The girl glanced at her watch again.

"Please, Jericho, not just yet!" she cried out over the sound of the wind and the squealing tires.

They cornered through the gates and up the drive, past the parked cars to the front door. Jericho sprang out of the car and ran into the house, leaving the driveway blocked. He heard the girl call out behind him but he paid no attention. The rock band belted at him, and the almost hysterical laughter.

He ran along the passage to Virgil Clarke's study and put his shoulder to the door as if he expected it to be bolted. There was a splintering sound and he hurtled into the room.

Virgil Clarke was sitting at his desk, his eyes wide with astonishment. Standing beside him was Roger Newfield, the young lawyer in the mod clothes.

"What in the name of—"

Clarke was staring at the door bolt which hung ripped from its fastenings.

"I'm afraid the joke—a very grim joke—was to be on you, sir," Jericho said, rubbing his shoulder.

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"Joke?"

"Death is a joke played on all of us, sooner or later," Jericho said. He moved slowly toward the desk, aware that Janice Clarke had come through the door behind him. She was standing there, her face a white mask, gripping the doorjamb to steady herself.

"Do you own a gun, Mr. Clarke?" Jericho asked.

"Why, yes, I do," Clarke said, bewildered.

"Where do you keep it?"

"Here. Here in my desk."

"May I see it?"

Clarke was not a man to take orders, but something of Jericho's violence had thrown him off balance. He opened the flat drawer of his desk and fumbled inside it. Then he looked up.

"It seems to be gone," he said. "I must have—misplaced it."

Jericho took a stride forward and was facing Roger Newfield. He held out his hand. Newfield stared at him, a nerve twitching high up on his cheek. Then Jericho stepped in and started to pat at Newfield's batik shirt. The young lawyer sidestepped and swung at Jericho.

Jericho's left hand blocked the punch and his right swung with crushing force at Newfield's jaw. The young man fell, his eyes rolling up into his head. Jericho bent down, searched the pockets, and came up with a small handgun. He dropped it on the desk.

"Is that yours, Mr. Clarke?" he asked.

The girl in the doorway screamed and ran to the fallen Newfield, crooning his name. "Roger! Roger!"

Clarke had picked up the gun. "It's mine," he said, in something close to a whisper.

"Suicide is the name of the game," Jericho said. "A fake suicide. Two fake suicides, in fact."

"I don't understand," Clarke said. His eyes were fixed on his wife, fondling the unconscious Newfield.

"You and the Williams girl both told me something I wasn't supposed to know," Jericho said, his voice hard. "You both implied that Mrs. Clarke was aware I was painting above the bank at Lookout Point. That meant the whole suicide gambit there was a fake, a setup. I was to stop her. I was to feel sorry for her. I would almost certainly be curious as to what had driven her to contemplate suicide, so I would accept her invitation to the party.

"You almost told me why, without knowing the reason yourself. I was to be the object of a practical joke, you said.

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But why me? Yes, I'm well known, but not to this crowd. What could she possibly do to me that would make me the butt of laughter? And then, when she asked me to take her away from here, I began to wonder. And when I suggested coming back she instantly looked at her watch. We hadn't, it seemed, been gone long enough. Long enough for what?"

"I don't follow you," Clarke said.

"Why the elaborate scheme to get me here? What could my presence here tonight possibly do for her? It suddenly hit me. I could provide her with an unbreakable alibi. Her friends might not be trustworthy. Her friends might be suspected of playing along with her, lying for her. But I, God help me, am a solid citizen with a reputation. If I testified she was with me it would hold fast."

"But why did she need an alibi?" Clarke asked.

"Because you were going to commit suicide, sir," Jericho said. "You were going to be found here, shot through the head with your own gun. The gun would be found in your hand with your fingerprints on it. But there was bound to be at least a faint suspicion. People close to you must know that your marriage isn't a happy one, and your wife was once charged with a murder. There are people who must still wonder if she was innocent of that crime or if it was your brilliance that set her free. They might ask if a woman who might have killed one husband might not have killed another. She didn't dare have that question asked. I could prevent it. I, the solid citizen, the stranger who had no past connections with her. I could have provided her with the perfect alibi if I hadn't insisted on coming home too soon."

Janice Clark looked up from where she was cradling Newfield in her arms. "It isn't possible for you to prove a word of this insane theory," she said. "Surely, Virgil, you can't believe—"

"It's not my job to prove it, Mrs. Clarke," Jericho said. "Your husband is the legal expert here. Maybe if he can stop feeling sorry for himself long enough, he'll know how to deal with you."

Jericho turned toward the door and then back again. "You were right, Mr. Clarke. I was asked here to be used. I trust my donkey's ears have disappeared."

He walked out into the night, the rock band hurting his ears. He was eager to get away, as far and as fast as he could.

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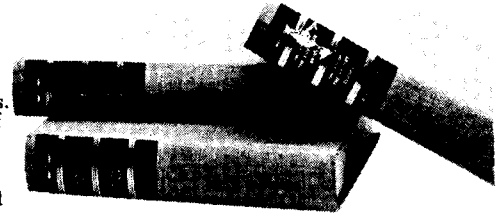

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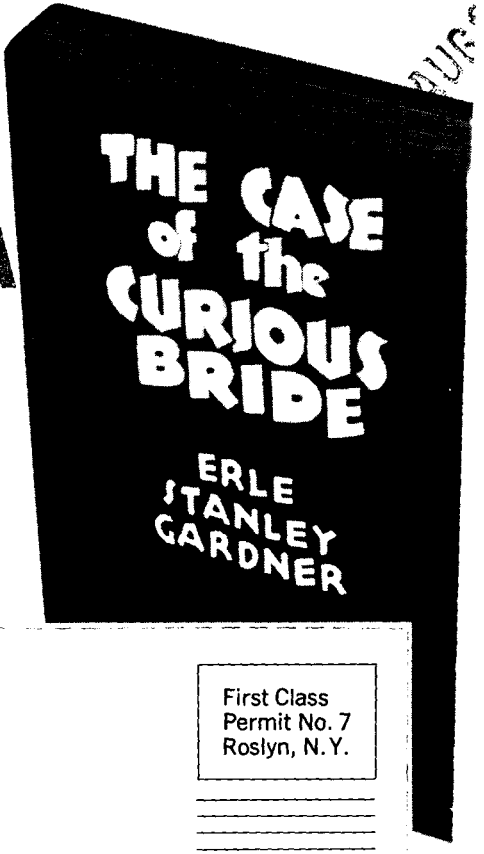

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